Framing Ethnicity: 
Storytelling in Italian American Novels

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THESIS  
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for all of the storytellers at the kitchen table
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SUMMARY

*Framing Ethnicity: Storytelling in Italian American Novels* articulates the relationship between social history and formal devices deployed by Italian American writers to construct ethnicity as a revision of national identity after 1965 in the post-Civil Rights era. In the context of this “ethnic narrative turn,” I present Italian American narratives as a case study for examining the degree to which storytelling constructs ethnicity in conjunction with the canonical issues of authorship, witnessing and selfhood, which have roots in 19th century American literature. Situated between the rhetorics of narrative theory and multi-ethnic aesthetics, my dissertation employs theories of the frame and theories of ethnocritical storytelling to assert the importance of narrative structures in the analysis and discussion of ethnic novels in general and Italian American novels in particular. I contend that in their innovative use of these formal devices, writers aestheticize the stories of an assimilated ethnic past within the frame while they confront the contradictions, conflicts and losses resulting from those past struggles outside of the frame.

I argue that narrative frames and embedded texts interpret representations of oral storytelling and constructions of audience for the ethnic writer working within the contested “imagined communities” of ethnicity, region, and nation. Drawing from frame theorists, I claim that by transforming elements of Italian oral tradition into an Italian American vernacular within formal literary frames, Italian American writers inscribe an aestheticized version of the immigrant experience which challenges the expectation of American national identity. I claim that Italian American writers repudiate the excesses of critical postmodern discourses, affirm the value of history, community and the individual self, and dialectically reconstruct national identity refracted through Italian American regional and transnational narratives.
SUMMARY (continued)

Within this critical context, the first four chapters investigate specific types of conventional characters—the migrant storyteller, the historical witness, the incompetent narrator and the collective author—against specific types of narrative frames in novels by Helen Barolini, Carole Maso, Tina De Rosa, Octavia Waldo, Rachel Guido deVries, Dorothy Bryant, and Mario Puzo. The last two chapters address the ideological function of stories in creating an Italian American mythos. Chapter six focuses on the novelists’ creation of hybrid Italian and American folklore figures in novels by Tony Ardizzone and Don DeLillo, and chapter seven examines the use of personal storytelling by critics of Italian American literature.
I. INTRODUCTION

“Because,” Marco said. He started to speak slowly, weighing his words, trying to fit them into their proper place. “Because I have been here now for six, seven years. I have seen this country from bottom to top. I have worked at every kind of job and have found nothing to make me stay in one place. I see one big goddamn country—rich, beautiful, like never I have seen anything before and all I feel is I want to keep moving. Everybody I find like your doctor here and Nick over there—mad, sore like hell about something. Nobody satisfied with anything, and I have become so that I sick myself with this American sickness.”

—Guido D’Agostino, Olives on the Apple Tree (26)

Harry’s own disaster was minor, local, generally forgotten. Few people knew or remember Harry at all. He was forgotten twice: when he left Berkeley in 1969 and again when he left even more dramatically in 1989. Only I have tangible reminders of him—in my garage: a box of his classroom papers, his attempts at a novel, a few letters. Still, I’m probably the wrong person to write Harry’s story. I suppose these repeated ‘sightings’ of him are simply my unconscious reminders to myself that if I don’t write it, no one else will.

—Dorothy Bryant, The Berkeley Pit (1-2)

Throughout American literature there have been countless characters like Marco from Guido D’Agostino’s Olives on the Apple Tree (1940) or Ruth Carson from Dorothy Bryant’s The Berkeley Pit (2007) that alternately function as storyteller, witness, commentator, and counselor. Where Marco goes in the novel, his listening audience follows closely behind. Ruth Carson, a writing teacher, is provoked by the tragedy “[o]n the day the twin towers came down” to write Harry Lynch’s story because “no one else will” (Bryant The Berkeley 1,2). In the seventy plus years in between the publication of D’Agostino’s pre-World War II novel and
Bryant’s post-9-ll novel, Italian American writers have used both narrative framing and representations of oral storytelling to tell the wider story of Italians in the United States and to comment on how that story has been constructed in the broader context of American culture.

_Framing Ethnicity_ examines Italian American novels for how their narrative frames foreground features of oral storytelling. At the intersection of narrative framing and ethnocritical storytelling lies the struggle of Italian American authors to promulgate the hard-won acceptance of an assimilated ethnic past and to claim a place in American literature that includes the contributions of an oral ethnic storytelling heritage transformed by writing and by the American experience. Full frames, partial frames and embedded stories in novels by Italian American writers both recount and question the acculturation of Italian immigrants in America. The reflexivity of the narrative frames that foreground both the storytellers and their stories creates tension between the texts-within-the-texts and the representations of oral-storytelling characteristics that often have their roots in Italy. These novels pass along stories about Italy and immigrant life in America, but also examine the larger issues of storytelling itself.

Within Italian American novels, characters tell stories to entertain, to teach values, and to communicate. From the earliest novels by Italian Americans, there have been characters who tell stories as well as storytellers as characters. The ubiquitous presence of stories and storytelling in these novels connect the traditions across genres and novels, authors and stories. Italian American writers establish an ethnic historical memory embedded in the framed structure of their novels to engage a community of readers both of and outside the ethnic traditions of folktales, songs, myths or oral histories. In these novels, the narrative frames and embedded narratives address the audience as an overlay that deepens the conflicts. The frames foreground and dialectically engage dramatic questions of ethnic and national identity in a
Bakhtinian dialogue that subverts the ideologies inherent in the traditionally authoritative narrative structures.

A. ORAL STORYTELLING AND ETHNICITY

Narrative is a social process in which individuals interact with institutions, culture and other individuals. Ethnicity, as a combination of identity and shared knowledge, is constructed in part through narrative especially in the context of Italian American literary texts. While the definition of ethnicity is elusive and historically constructed in the wider cultural context, most critics agree that it is relational and always in flux. William Boelhower’s discussion of how ethnicity has been defined focuses on problems with how definitions are constructed and what they include. He cites the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* for its “exhaustive” example of “the hopelessness of the encyclopedic approach to ethnicity” which includes sixteen features: “origins, migration, arrival, settlement, economic life, social structure, social organization, family and kinship, behavior and personal/individual characteristics, culture, religion, education, politics, intergroup relations, group maintenance, individual ethnic commitment” (*Through a Glass* 32). Because narrative allows individuals to organize complex interactions between elements such as these offered by the *Harvard Encyclopedia*’s approach, stories can construct ethnic (and/or national identities) while also calling them into question.

Narrative theory distinguishes among storyteller, story, storytelling style and the audience, which all converge to constitute the storytelling event. An individual telling a story enacts interpretations of the past as well as learns strategies for future action. By organizing experience into a story, a storyteller engages in relational, referential complexity that can
produce or construct new meanings and new experiences for the self in both the storyteller and the audience. For an audience, a narrative is a site of contested meaning where, after interacting with the story and the storyteller, the audience’s understanding may be reconstructed and the relationship changed for both storyteller and listeners. For example, in *Call of Stories*, Robert Coles recalls a story that William Carlos Williams told him about a woman patient who is an elderly Italian immigrant (112). The old woman is not happy with Williams’ preoccupied doctorial manner and accuses him of “talking rough,” of being a “big shot.” The woman compels Williams to tell her about his own family before she allows him to continue her treatment. In Williams’ analysis, the woman wanted to engage the doctor’s story so that she could make sense of the way he was acting. Once he tells her of his wife and his own sick child, the Italian woman gains access to his life, and relates it to her own. More importantly to Williams and Coles, however, is that after telling his own story, Williams is changed and is unable to return to the gruff professionalism that had provoked the woman in the first place. On the discursive level, studies of narrative as knowledge have described the way individual stories have challenged institutional stories in a similar fashion. Localized knowledge clashes with institutional knowledge to provoke change.

Theorist Jay Clayton’s work has drawn on the poststructuralist ideas of Foucault, Lyotard, and deCerteau to identify what he calls “The Narrative Turn in Minority Writing” but claims that “storytelling—particularly oral, folk, [and] traditional storytelling” has “become a prominent topic in current fiction” (91). Clayton argues that:

[T]he narrative turn in fiction is related to the emphasis in our society on local political struggles. The tactical value of narrative in politics is by no means restricted to minority writers or minority causes, but the frequently collective
nature of a minority group’s struggle against dominant culture highlights the altered political function of narrative today. (94)

Stories preserve strategies of helping people “escape disciplinary control” (96) and serve as a “source of empowerment for the many oppressed or marginalized people” (99). Clayton emphasizes, as do others, the role of audience and community that are enacted in part by the focus on the storyteller: “In oral literature the narrative locates all relevant participants—the storyteller, the hero, and the listeners(within a community that the telling itself helps to bring into existence” (103). Clayton’s examples are drawn from “writers of color” he claims “because the non-Euro-American heritage on which they often draw makes the theme of storytelling particularly visible” (94), but Clayton also acknowledges the “focus on storytelling in white ethnic writing” which he claims “certainly stress[es] the importance of oral or traditional narrative forms” (note 9 page 163). As did the other minoritized writers, Italian Americans writers participated in this “ethnic narrative turn.”

Italian American writers like Helen Barolini, Mario Puzo, Carole Maso, and Tina DeRosa published novels after the mid-1970s. Just as in the African American and Native American novels in Clayton’s sample, these Italian American novels use frames to focus attention on the storyteller, enhance the oral qualities within the narratives, and challenge the dominant narratives about Italian Americans to present alternative versions of the story of Italians in the United States. During the ethnic revival movements that resulted from the hard-fought civil rights battles of the 1950s and 1960s, the turn in fiction toward storytelling, both embedded and framed, allows writers to distinguish from, challenge, and to claim allegiance to the nationalist characteristics of their choosing. Representations of storytelling add a multivalent dialectic to narrative texts which encompass conflicts and oppositions, alliances
and agreements. Using the frame allows minority writers to explore and assert their difference from the national values that they do not accept, and qualify the elements that they do.

Narrative stories played an important role in the oral tradition brought to the United States by southern Italian immigrants who were for the most part largely illiterate. Fred Gardaphe explains, “Italian Americans are heirs to a rich oral culture, one that once was passed on from generation to generation not by diaries, letters, short stories, or novels, but by word of mouth” (Italian Signs 25). Oral culture provides a context to study Italian American literature. “By considering the literature produced by Americans of Italian descent as an extension of oral traditions,” Gardaphe writes, “we can begin to examine not only what history this literature preserves but also in what manner that history is preserved” (“From Oral Tradition” 298).

In Italy, in addition to proverbs and gossip, fairytales, folktales, legends, and local histories were passed through communities in more formal public events. These stories, called märchen, were performed by talented storytellers of the community termed cantastorie while peasants sat around the fire at night (Malpezzi and Clements 163-164). Pellegrino D’Acierno defines i cantastorie as “singer[s] of history” and “tribal historians who linked the immigrants to their oral traditions” (713). Transplanted to the United States, oral storytelling persisted in Italian American communities, but according to Malpezzi and Clements:

The storytelling that flowered among Italian Americans involved their own experiences and those of their family members who had gone through adventures which though not as magical as the events that befell the heroes of the Märchen and the protagonists of the supernatural legends, involved just as much peril and had the advantage of immediacy and obvious relevance to those in the audience. (165)
Instead of the barns and stables of Italy where the peasants gathered to hear stories, in the United States oral stories were still integrated into daily living but occurred around the family tables of social gatherings big and small. As the fairytales and legends were replaced with retellings of important family experiences such as immigration crossings or work tales, the values and character-building traits of the legends were transposed onto the personal stories of individual triumph or failure. Elizabeth Stone writes of the importance of family stories and explains that “[t]hey provide the family with esteem because they often show family members in an attractive light or define the family in a flattering way. They also give messages and instructions; they offer blueprints and ideals; they issue warnings and prohibitions” (5). In the United States, the family stories transmitted the ethnic social values previously taught by the märchen.

While Stone places the stories of her Italian-born grandmother next to other ethnic, gendered, and marginalized groups whose family stories are important to their oral traditions, Malpezzi and Clements trace how the Italian style of märchen are transposed onto the personal storytelling of the Italian American immigrants and their progeny. Malpezzi and Clements claim: “Moreover, even though narratives of personal experience may be unique in their details, they often follow stylized patterns which mold their content into traditional forms, repeated tellings of the same story will often produce a formulaic style for certain portions of the narrative, which are told in virtually the same words each time” (197). The Italian oral tradition can be identified and retains stylistic details despite the content of the stories changing to a more American-based personal experience. Gardaphe traces these stylistic elements through the immigrant autobiographies like Rosa, Son of Italy, and The Soul of an Immigrant, three representative texts that constitute what he terms the “poetic mode” of early Italian
American literature (Italian Signs 31). Among other characteristics, Italian American fiction continues to use references to proverbs, magic (sometimes configured as religious magic), dreams, and folklore. While the vernacular elements of the Italian American oral tradition are strikingly apparent in this early period as Gardaphe points out, Italian American writers use these stylistic features and representations of oral storytelling into the twenty-first century often as embedded stories and in combination with narrative frames. When these vernacular oral elements are represented in novels by Italian American writers, these elements signal the distinct Italian American ethnic past.

In the contrasting examples that began this chapter, D’Agostino’s Marco from Olives on the Apple Tree relates tales of his travels around the United States to teach his companions of the things that he has learned. By passing the stories on, Marco’s personal experience becomes entertainment for the evening and inspires the group of neighbors to assess their quality of life. On the other hand, in Bryant’s The Berkeley Pit, the character Ruth attempts to inscribe the forgotten oral legend of Harry into writing so that his story can be passed on to others in a form that will outlast her ability to speak about him. In Bryant’s more recent novel, Ruth tries to make the oral story’s form more permanent to counter the anxiety and isolation of living in a complex post-9-11 era.

B. AUDIENCE AND NATIONALISM

The narrative frame allows the writer to control the reception of the story through imagining an audience. The characters who listen to Marco in Olives on the Apple Tree are other Italian immigrants who have traveled the same journey as he, but beyond the characters in the fictional space, D’Agostino writes in Marco’s oral vernacular to address American readers,
Italian readers, and Italian American readers. Marco’s observations are recounted for the Italian immigrant laborer types “like Nick over here” to whom he is talking. His observations are also meant to reach the assimilated Italian Americans who have reached educational and financial success “like your doctor here” as well as the Americans who populate the “one big goddamn country—rich, beautiful” through which Marco has been continually traveling (26). In 1928, describing the dilemma of the “Aframerican” author, James Weldon Johnson addresses “the problem of the double audience”; he writes: “It is more than a double audience; it is a divided audience, an audience made up of two elements with differing and often opposite and antagonistic points of view. His audience is always both white America and black America” (qtd in Ashe 9). Johnson’s comments apply to ethnic writers all along the color line who have had to address this problem of audience. In relation to Italian Americans, Jerre Mangione writes about a similar dualistic mindset for Italian American writers as being “[t]orn between the need to conform to American customs and values and the obligation to be loyal to their parents” that cling to the “Old World” culture (172). While Mangione does not theorize how this struggle manifests itself in the fictional forms of the Italian American writer, he takes a Freudian psychological view of writing as a “method of self-analysis, a means by which a writer can discover himself and at the same time cope with personal feelings of conflict and guilt” (174). Bertram Ashe also claims that writers cope with and “manage” these conflicting audiences, and specifically through narrative frames. He builds on Johnson’s explanation, and writes, “The question for the black writer, then, is not how to choose between the two audiences—but how to manage them both” (9).

If, as Johnson claims about the “Aframerican” writer, the ethnic writer in the United States is always addressing a double (or multiple) audience—white America, ethnic America,
and for immigrant writers possibly an audience from her or his country of origin—then imagining an audience means imagining a relationship to nation. Benedict Anderson famously defines “nation” as “an imagined political community” which he characterizes as “limited” and “sovereign,” and as a “community” (6-7). Death becomes a part of membership. “Ultimately,” he writes of community, “it is this fraternity that makes it possible over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as [be] willing to die for such limited imaginings” (7). In other words, imagining community includes imagining one can fight to keep the community together. If one is part, others are not part. Seamus Deane expands Anderson’s idea about how one imagines the “limitedness” of nation when he argues that “Almost all nationalist movements have been derided as provincial, actually or potentially racist, [and] given to exclusivist and doctrinaire positions and rhetoric” (8). Not only is the imagined community of nation limited and finite, but in Deane’s terms, it excludes based on racial or ethnic groups. Deane is writing about the British exclusion of the Irish, but historically in the United States, exclusion has followed this nation’s racial politics of the color line. Toni Morrison also discusses the exclusiveness of the national literary audience and claims, “[U]ntil very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white” (xii). She illustrates how American politics and culture construct an Africanist mythology in order to exclude it:

American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen.

Americans did not have a profligate, predatory nobility from which to wrest an identity of national virtue while continuing to covet aristocratic license and
luxury. The American nation negotiated both its disdain and its envy … through a self-reflexive contemplation of fabricated, mythological Africanism. (47)

Morrison’s analysis on the national construction of an Africanist “other” targets mainly canonical white American writers, and she asks, “What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level always conscious of representing one’s own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be ‘universal’ or race-free?” (xii). In other words, she asks how the writer that is excluded from the imagined audience constructs a representation of that exclusion to the audience that does not acknowledge exclusion but instead considers itself “universal.” For “othered” ethnics, including Italian American writers, imagining an audience in America as white means excluding the non-white segment from the political community, and such a writer must be able to imagine self-exclusion to claim that she or he is part of an American nationalism. Italian Americans historically have been on both sides of the color-line, and Italian American literature has focused on the impact and consequences caused by this changing status within the American “imagined community.”

Writers have been able to use narrative frames to negotiate the ideological and psychological obstacles of imagining an American literary nationalism and their part in it. Terry Eagleton discusses the irony inherent in this position:

Subjects, national or otherwise, do indeed experience needs that are repressed but demand realization; it is just that one ironic effect of such repression is to render us radically uncertain of what our needs really are. The very repressive conditions that make it necessary for the subject to express itself freely also tend to render it partially opaque to itself. If subjects have needs, then we already know what one at least of these needs must be, namely, the need to know what
one’s needs are. The metaphysics of nationalism tend to obscure this point, by assuming a subject somehow intuitively present to itself; in privileging the concept of self-realization, it elevates a subject-object relation over a subject-subject one, forgetting that the expression and formulation of needs are always a dialogical affair, that needs and desires are always in some sense received back from an ‘other’ (29).

The narrative frame allows for a writer to explore this subject-object relation, making the story-within-the-text the object but retaining the dialogical qualities recorded in descriptions of embedded storytelling—oral, written, or folkloric. Bryant’s *The Berkeley Pit* offers a snapshot of how this narrative frame functions. The national tragedy that took place on September 11, 2001, triggers the need for the narrator Ruth Carson to tell the story of Harry Lynch. Through the frame, Bryant as writer is able to embed Harry’s written work and his oral storytelling as Ruth Carson narrates her relationship with both Harry and the Civil Rights movement, which swept them both up in Berkeley during the late 1960s. Bryant puts the Italian immigrant history of Harry’s mining family into dialogue with the Black Nationalist movement of the late 1960s, all under the umbrella of Ruth’s need to make sense of the September 11th attacks and their jingoistic aftermath. The drama of Ruth’s need to tell Harry’s story reveals a compelling example of how a writer can connect ethnic experience with her relationship to an imagined nation through narrative framing.

The narrative frame is often used by Italian American and other ethnic writers to define the borders and margins—both fictional and material—that construct their relationship to the imaginary community Anderson calls “the nation.” If nationalism is an “imagined community” as Anderson claims, and if every nationalist movement is exclusionary as Deane claims, then
the ethnic writer is positioned as imagining him or herself as potentially excluding the ethnic part of identity in order to claim a relationship to that imagined nation. By framing both storytelling and memory, Italian American writers construct elements of identity, call together an audience with shared identity, and present localized knowledge to contest dominant nationalist narratives.

C. ITALIAN AMERICANS AND WHITENESS

In the last twenty years, literary studies of Italian American novels have established a dynamic sub-grouping of texts within American fiction which places characteristics of transplanted Italian and Sicilian culture into dialogue with American culture. Given the historical immigrant experience of southern Italians, their racial status in Italy and the United States, and their subsequent assimilation into dominant American social culture, Italian American novels speak to a specific American experience which enlarges and deepens the discussion of American literature. Novels published in the ethnic revival atmosphere that followed the Civil Rights movement treat Italian American ethnicity differently than novels published before the social movements of the 1960s. Instead of narratives of assimilation, the more recent Italian American novels written in the post-Civil Rights era construct narratives which to varying degrees reclaim an Italian American ethnic identity of difference, yet retain the economic privileges and rewards of whiteness.

Historians such as David A.J. Richards, David Roediger, and Matthew Frye Jacobson have argued that the construction of the color line in the United States located working-class and ethnic immigrants, including Italians, in opposition to middle-class whiteness. Jacobson claims that like the Celts, Slavs, Hebrews and other Mediterranean immigrants, southern
Italians and Sicilians fractured the white supremacists’ concept of “monolithic whiteness” and were thought a different “shade of white” (41-42). Italian Americans associated with and worked the same jobs as non-whites which Jacobson claims represented the problem; he explains, “It was not just that Italians did not look white to certain social arbiters, but that they did not act white” (57). Italian immigrants throughout the United States experienced different amounts of prejudice predicated on local racial attitudes, and many suffered violent attacks which included lynching. However, while historians agree on the abuses suffered by Italian immigrants, they do not agree on their racial status. Thomas Guglielmo claims in White on Arrival, “for all the racial discrimination and prejudice that many Italians faced as Latins, Mediterraneans, southern Italians, and ‘new’ immigrants, they were still accepted as white” (15). The conflicting historical viewpoints suggests the dualistic racial experience of Italian immigrants remained in flux in the early decades of the twentieth century. The Italian Americans experienced both sides of the color line, alternately and sometimes simultaneously. In addition, their material and economic conditions often paralleled other minoritized groups. Jennifer Guglielmo writes, “Since many Italians remained poor and working-class longer than most other European immigrants, they have often lived in the nation’s blue-collar neighborhoods, amid people of color” (4). She adds that Italian Americans discarded the alliances formed as their social mobility increased and as they learned to “effectively distance themselves from their Brown and Black neighbors [to] receive the ample rewards that come with being white.” Guglielmo claims that Italians told themselves “narratives of self-righteousness” inflating their abilities to overcome struggles through individual efforts instead of acknowledging that they benefited from “the political institutions and methods of economic
production that preserve white upper-class power” (4). In conforming to the myths of the past, as a group, Italian Americans performed according to the constraints of American whiteness.

In literature, Steven Belluscio’s work examines passing narratives in several Italian American novels and explores how other white ethnics including Italian Americans responded with fictional strategies similar to that of African Americans. Belluscio advocates that the controversy surrounding the racial status of Italian Americans can be illuminating about the wider American culture; he writes that:

[I]t may be best to imagine a confused consensus—if one could indeed call it that between the two models, in which the Italian (or Jew) is white (and thereby more likely to be able to pass) and yet not white, at least not by American standards of Nordic perfection (and thereby in need of a number of acculturative gestures so as to abide by these very standards). It may be that the tension between the two is irresolvable. (35)

The “irresolvable” racial “inbetweenness” of Italian American identity positions Italian American writers to address a liminality of experience and a relationship to nation that reflects that very “inbetweenness.”

In the post civil rights era, where race and ethnicity like other elements of identity are perceived as socially constructed and performed to a certain extent, Italian Americans as white European ethnics are no longer thought to be constrained by the limitations that affected previous generations of Italian immigrants to the United States. As Mary Waters’ study claims about third and fourth generation Italian Americans:

[F]or later-generation white ethnics, ethnicity is not something that influences their lives unless they want it to. In the world of work and school and
neighborhood, individuals do not have to admit to being ethnic unless they choose to. Ethnicity has become a subjective identity, invoked at will by the individual. (7)

If Waters is correct, then the choice of writers to engage stories about Italian American ethnicity keeps the discussion of ethnic identity present and resonating for a purpose. Instead of telling stories of assimilation, as in the novels of an earlier generation, Italian American writers begin troubling the assumption of economic and cultural success with a variety of narratives which do more than recall the “old world” struggles or the segregated “old neighborhoods” of the past immigrant experience. Waters explains, “If fourth generation Italian-Americans ceased being ‘Italian’ in any meaningful sense, and ceased identifying as Italian, then white European ethnicity was reaching the end of the road in the United States” (6). No longer significantly constrained by biological or social prejudice that marked ethnic difference for the previous generations, in the wake of gains made by other groups in the civil rights movement, Italian American writers use storytelling to re-inscribe in fiction these recently overcome elements of ethnic identity. Italian American ethnicity retains importance in the novels of this era because writers continue to construct and question Italian American identity through stories and storytelling. In the white ethnic revival movement of the 1960s and 1970s, novels like Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather* reclaim what Jacobson calls “racial distinctness” at the same time that they assert the economic and social privileges of whiteness. Jacobson states that for historians of the period the challenge “is not only to recognize the fluidity of race, but to find ways of narrating events, social movements, and the trajectory of individual lives in all their integrity along with the convoluted path of an ever-shifting racial reality” (275). By re-marking whiteness with Italian American ethnicity, writers are refusing
what Patricia Williams has called the ethnic erasure caused by whiteness; she explains, “if ‘underclass’ is a way of unnaming the poor, ‘whiteness’ is a way of not naming ethnicity” (258). Williams’ metaphor is that of the “ethnic scar,” the presence of which still causes the deep divisions in current American society; “One loses sight of the fact that some ‘successfully assimilated’ ethnics in the United States have become so only by paying the high cost of burying forever languages, customs and cultures” (253). Italian American novelist then call attention to these battle scars of ethnic loss.

By choosing to perpetuate a narrative of individual success built on hard work and sacrifice, stories of Italian Americans construct links to long-standing mythic narratives of American citizenship. However when these writers use narrative frames, they can call the myth of success into question and assess the greater losses. Critically examining the framing and how Italian American novels construct narratives can illustrate how writers have interrogated these American myths of success to reconstruct, manage, and negotiate both individual and group relationships to ethnic and national identities.

D. HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF FRAMING

The relationship between frame texts and oral storytelling reaches back to the beginnings of American literature when early 19th century writers were attempting to establish the character of a national literature that differentiated the United States from Britain. Page Richards’ work has traced the problems of overcoming the lack of an American oral tradition that would function as an originary national tradition. She writes: “The fact is that American literature came into existence lacking a prior and longstanding oral tradition in English. But what it lacked in this tradition, it made up as performance.” Frame texts, according to Richards,
“perform the part of oral literature for a country that was born writing” (187) and “grew out of defensiveness about the inadequacy of language in an extra literary context” (189), that is, the political need to distinguish American literature from British texts. Benjamin Franklin literally advocates for the valued traits of “Americanness” even before the founding of the United States with his 1733 “The Way to Wealth” – the preface to Poor Richard’s Almanac written by the fictional Richard Saunders to record the fictional oration of Father Abraham. The narrative frame both authenticates the American experience and contrasts the authority of the British standard forms at the same time, a double play (authenticating and questioning) that scholars with widely differing purposes all take as foundational.

In early 19th century American literature, Richards points out “how common the ordinary frame narrative is in canonical American literature” (192) and claims the proliferation of frame texts in their various forms legitimized not “a story of American originality” but “originals in its people” (197). The frames highlighted the storytellers as much as the localized ways of telling the story and the purpose for the storytelling event. Canonical American writers like Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville all used frames to reshape ways of thinking about segments of national history to fit the changing ideals of the American national character. Irving frames Rip Van Winkle (1819) with the old gentleman who collects oral tales of the common people; while the tale itself records sloth and misogyny, the frame argues for an inclusive representative American history that includes stories of the common people in addition to more official written documents. Hawthorne introduces The Scarlet Letter (1850) with “The Custom House” which describes the effects of national politics on the writer and rewrites an unforgiving Puritan ideology as romantic rebellion turned into Hester Prynne’s generous and willing service to local community. Melville’s Benito Cereno (1856) adds an end
frame to the narrative in the form of a legal deposition which sheds light on how Captain Delano incompetently narrates the events of the slave rebellion aboard the San Dominick. The legal narrative frames Delano’s paternalistic point of view and provides an opposing narrative history that calls into question the long-standing paternalistic policies toward American slaves. In these examples, even in canonical literature, the narrative frame addresses the writers’ relationship to nation and national character.

American writers deftly deployed narrative frames throughout the nineteenth century not only in fictional genres, but also in non-fiction. Oral narratives needed narrative framing to distinguish the importance of the storyteller’s ethnic or national identity when establishing story as literature. The frame’s dual effect raised questions of difference about the established cultural texts and served as part of the legitimating apparatus in the mid-nineteenth century when slave narratives were written down and studied. The devices that frame slave narratives served to authenticate the oral narratives. Esther Fritsch writes of slave narratives that “[f]ictionality was minimized through devices such as testimonials by white friends or sponsors, the inclusion of documentary texts, the various inscriptions of self and authorship such as signatures, photographs or engraved portrait[s] on the cover...” (538). Collectively called “paratexts,” these additions frame the oral tales to add authenticity and highlight the historical and political circumstances surrounding the storyteller, as well as the individuals charged with documenting the stories. Just as with other types of frames, paratexts often explicate the writer’s relation to national identity and nation as William Garrison famously compares Frederick Douglass to the Pilgrims and revolutionary war heroes like Patrick Henry in his Preface to Douglass’ *The Narrative of the Life* (1845).
A similar history of authenticating “paratexts” may be traced in early publications of other ethnic and Native American texts. In *Pocahontas’s Daughters*, Mary Dearborn writes, “By such devices—prefaces, appendices, explanations and authentications—the ethnic text makes its way into the world” (32). Her discussion of authorship, which looks at texts such as Mourning Dove’s *Co-ge-we-a: The Half Blood* (1927), Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859), and Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land* (1912) traces through the prefaces and biographical sketches written by editors, teachers, and critics. Italian American texts received similar treatment by their publishers. For example, Pascal D’Angelo’s *Son of Italy* (1924) includes an introduction by Carl Van Doren. Sister Blandina Segale’s *At the End of the Santa Fe Trail* (1932), when first published in one volume, opens with an author’s note that includes a facsimile of Segale’s signature, followed by a photo of Segale, a photo of her sister Justina and a dedication. The 1999 University of New Mexico Press edition also adds an introduction and an afterword. Rosa Casettari’s *Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrant* (1970) a collection of stories told to and written down by the social worker Marie Hall Ets includes a foreword, an introductory note and an introduction that all precede the text. The introductory materials contemporary to the narratives mediate the storyteller’s strangeness and situate the narratives in relation to national identity. Smaller apparati like glossaries both explain and highlight the texts’ use of foreign language words. Even post-World War II novels like Antonia Pola’s self-published *Who Can Buy the Stars?* (1952) include glossaries which simultaneously marks the difference of language and aids understanding.

Dearborn describes these addendums as “the tradition of the mediated text” which she writes about as being crucial to the publication of ethnic texts, particularly gendered texts: “The tradition of ethnic female authorship is a tradition of mediation, by which novels are introduced
and sometimes produced by agents other than the ethnic woman” (33). Dearborn’s analysis of these framing devices declares that “[a]ll of these devices serve to translate the foreignness of the ethnic experience for the dominant culture, to guarantee the author’s ethnicity, and often, in the last analysis to make the text more accessible to the reader” (36). Like fictional frames, the publishers’ framing devices mediate between the storyteller and the audience, but also have a subversive effect; in the case of ethnic women authors, Dearborn continues, authenticating devices “have a strangely opposite effect, so that the text staggers under and is nearly submerged by [the devices’] weight. The story of the story or the story of the author threatens to become the story itself” (37). Although Dearborn focuses on the apparatus that establish authorship, her characterization of the framing devices parallels the fictional narrative frames that novelists have written into their texts. That is, Italian American writers who utilize narrative frames also foreground “the story of the story” or the story in the story, and like the frames which mediate between storyteller and audience for non-fiction texts, Italian American novels implement frame structures and texts-within-the-text to provide commentary about the stories or storytellers within the frames.

Not surprisingly, ethnic and racially othered writers who want to address their place in the American tradition employ narrative frames. The dialectical nature of the frame allows for capturing and controlling the story within the story—Ashe’s “managing” again—generally in the language of oral vernacular culled from the ethnic oral traditions of that divided national audience. The framed representation of oral language is then inserted into the literary tradition but retains a sense of its orality. As Bertram Ashe⁹ has argued, when African American fiction writers such as Charles Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson and Zora Neale Hurston utilize narrative frames, they seek to explore the African American spoken voice in storytelling and to
retain the authentic status of that oral tradition (4). Ashe quotes John Edgar Wideman who writes:

> From the point of view of American literature, the fact of black speech (and the oral roots of a distinct literary tradition—ultimately the tradition itself) existed only when it was properly ‘framed,’ within works which had status in the dominant literary system. For black speech the frame was the means of entering the literate culture in order to define the purposes or ends for which black speech could be employed. (4)

In other words, fiction writers utilize the framed structure to appeal to the dominantly imagined white national reading public while asserting a textual form of the black oral tradition to appeal to the black audience. Similarly, the Italian American writers examined in *Framing Ethnicity* use fictional structures to mark the borders around representations of the oral tradition for the Italian American audience as well as enter into the national dialogue by utilizing the dominant literary conventions which historically have been used to build the imagined community of American nation. The frame puts into question: who gets to tell the story, through what body, why, how, and for what audience—what segment of that divided audience. The frame highlights the written aspect and creates tension with the oral aspects of the story itself. I discuss texts that are explicitly about the Italian American experience and therefore already immersed in a dialogue with American nationalism but by fictionalizing the publishing apparatus that has “midwifed,” as Dearborn calls it, ethnic texts into the dominant culture, Italian American writers who use frames in their novels call attention to how their stories negotiate their own difference. The writers legitimize the foreignness of their own storytellers and stories by mediating that difference through the accepted form of the frame.
The ideology of a narrative frame can accommodate reflections on the imagined communities that define nation particularly in how a narrative frame allows for the manipulation of time and space. In Anderson’s map of the development of nationalism, the dismantling of religious communities and the dynastic realm constructed new relationships to time. Connected to the Enlightenment’s rise of the individual and the advances of “secular sciences” his term for this new relationship to time is Walter Benjamin’s idea of “homogenous, empty time”; “in which” Anderson writes, “simultaneity is … traverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar” (24). Like Anderson’s example of the newspaper, a narrative frame can juxtapose two stories across time and space and connect in the “homogenous, empty time” of the narrative where the reader is forced to participate in the imagined community of nation, the story's position in that community, and her or his connection to it. The frame allows the writer to control the discursive relationship to time and space and forces the contemplation of that discursive plane.

E. PREVIEW OF CHAPTERS

I have organized Framing Ethnicity around the significant elements of the storytelling event which dominate and organize the form. Components such as storyteller, audience, witness, and community all recur but individual chapters take one aspect as the starting point and the focus. Within this critical context, my succeeding chapters two through five investigate specific types of conventional characters—the migrant storyteller, the historical witness, the incompetent narrator and the collective author—against specific types of narrative frames. The last two chapters address the ideological function of stories in creating an Italian American
mythos; chapter six focuses on the novelists’ creation of hybrid Italian and American folklore figures, while chapter seven examines the Italian American literary critics’ use of personal storytelling.

In *Chapter Two, “Migrant Storytellers: Narrating the Self,”* I read Helen Barolini’s *Umbertina* (1979) and Carole Maso’s *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat* (1994) against Adriana Cavarero’s theories of self-narration and argue that characters in both novels construct a gendered ethnic identity through the stories their characters tell about themselves in speech and in writing. Each writer uses the figure of the migrant storyteller confined to the private sphere of self-narration who writes a personal journal. The framed text-within-the-text contrasts the embedded representations of oral narration to anchor the characters’ self-constructed ethnic identities within their ceaseless migration between Europe and America and to depict each woman’s trouble with finding a place within nation.

Octavia Waldo’s *A Cup of Sun* (1961) provides a comparative understanding of Tina DeRosa’s *Paper Fish* (1980) in *Chapter Three, “Historical Witnesses: Remembering the Community.”* Applying Victoria Aarons’ theory of storytelling as witness and Michel Laguerre’s theory of minoritized space, I argue that both novelists employ modernist devices to bear witness to historical ethnic regional neighborhoods. Utilizing a mythic frame that reads as unbounded by time, Waldo sets her closed ethnic region at odds with the national trauma of World War II. Extending the experimental form, De Rosa frames her novel with a stream-of-consciousness prologue and epilogue that binds the narrative to the regional discourses of family and neighborhood and testifies against the national discourse represented by federal urban renewal which destroys the Italian American neighborhood.
The embedded dream narratives framed in Rachel Guido deVries’ *Tender Warriors* (1986), Dorothy Bryant’s *Miss Giardino* (1978), and Carole Maso’s *Ghost Dance* (1986) are the focus of Chapter Four, “Unreliable Dreamers: Restoring the Memory.” Each novel employs an unreliable narrator to encourage skepticism about the stories that unfold and to call attention to the role storytelling plays in keeping the past present in order to challenge systems of authority. By doing so, each novelist interrogates how stories function to construct history—whether it is personal, family, cultural or national. Using James Phelan’s matrix of unreliability to analyze the embedded dream narratives, this chapter argues that unreliable storytellers challenge values and traditions through their stories and enable the opposing dream narratives to rebuild ethnic memory in order to restore the readers’ trust in their versions of the Italian American story.

Chapter Five, “Mirrored Authors: Writing the Writer” examines Italian American authorship in Mario Puzo’s *Fools Die* (1978) and *The Sicilian* (1984) by employing Donald Pease’s authorship theory and Lucien Dallenbach’s theory of the *mise en abyme* as a mirror frame. The chapter maps how Puzo utilizes the *mise en abyme* as a frame in *Fools Die* and as the object of the frame in *The Sicilian* in order to explore the power relations of authorship. When read against *The Godfather* and Puzo’s bitter essays about the experience of writing the best-seller, I argue that Puzo uses the frames to critique the distinctions between elite and popular fiction, undermine the figure of the individual author in *Fools Die* and construct a powerful collective Italian American authorship in *The Sicilian* that exposes the hypocrisy of the nation state.

In Chapter Six, “Mythologizing Raconteurs: Performing the Folktale,” I examine how Tony Ardizzone’s *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu* (1999) and Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*
(1997) each rewrite folktales, and, through their use of frames, interrogate how stories create community by collecting and reinterpreting stories for new audiences and future storytellers. Applying Giuseppe Cocchiara’s theories that connect the folktale to emerging nationalism and Jack Zipes’ theories of the subversiveness of folktales I argue the political nature of each novel’s performance. Through each novel’s frame, the representations of oral tales pass through time and space via a social and material reality, change with repetition in new contexts, and subvert the dominant American ways of knowing. Creating a shared cultural base to keep the Italian American past experience present, Ardizzone and DeLillo mythologize historical figures and ordinary men and women to restore an Italian American communal knowledge and create a shared responsibility that augments and interacts with the expectations and demands of national identity.

In Chapter Seven: “Critical Chroniclers: Calling the Audience for the Criticism of Italian American Literature,” I analyze the role that personal storytelling has played in the criticism of Italian American texts to call together a community of critics and to authenticate the role of localized and “unauthorized” knowledge in the study of literature. Focusing on essays from Helen Barolini’s The Dream Book (1985), Marianna De Marco Torgovnick’s Crossing Ocean Parkway (1994), and Fred Gardaphe’s From Wise Guys to Wise Men (2006) as well as several shorter critical essays I apply theories of narrative inquiry to show that personal storytelling is used as a method, a mode, and a metaphor in literary criticism to politicize the study of texts that have for the most part existed in the margins of canonical American literature. I claim that personal narrative establishes the credibility of the critic in still-emerging fields such as Italian American Literature and documents the ethnic vernacular as well as the resistance that the critics struggle against to research marginalized literatures. The use of
personal stories in literary criticism subverts the long-standing fallacy of the disinterested critic and directly challenges critical values and standards, as well as established notions of literary criticism.

1 See two collections edited by Werner Sollors for a broad historical and theoretical overview of how ethnicity has been defined: *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader* and *The Invention of Ethnicity*.

2 The most relevant of these studies of narrative inquiry include Jerome Bruner’s *Making Stories: Law, Literature, and Life*, Clandinin & Connelly’s *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, Peter Clough’s *Narratives and Fictions in Educational Research*, Paul Cobley’s *Narrative*, Robert Coles’s *The Call of Stories*, Cathy Fleischer’s *Composing Teacher-Research: A Prosaic History*, Maxine Greene’s *The Dialectic of Freedom*, and Margery Wolf’s *A Thrice Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism and Ethnographic Responsibility*.


4 See Rose Basile Green's *The Italian-American Novel A Document of Interaction of Two Cultures*. Her analysis engages a vast number of writers and argues that their books structure a continuum of the stages of assimilation.

5 Actually the connection between narrative frames and oral storytelling can be traced back even further to texts from all over the world and in different eras. Richards cites Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, and Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, (186) while other examples include Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* and even older texts like the *Arabian Nights*.

6 Though Todd Thomson focuses on Franklin’s satire, see Todd Thomson’s dissertation for how Benjamin Franklin’s newspaper sketches create an American persona for the British audience during the Stamp Act Crisis of the 1760s: *Modest Proposals: American Satire and Political Change from Franklin to Lincoln*, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2008.
7 See Bernard Duyfhuizen’s article in the Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory, Seymour Chatman’s Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film, Bertram Ashe’s From Within the Frame: Storytelling in African-American Fiction, Mary Ann Caws’ Reading Frames in Modern Fiction and articles by John Frow and Marie-Laure Ryan in Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames.

8 In the 1930s the W.P.A. used similar paratexts to foreground the institutional project of story collection.

9 Ashe’s study spans from Chesnutt to Wideman and is part of a growing body of work that examines oral storytelling in American literature. In addition to Ashe’s From Within the Frame: Storytelling in African-American Fiction, Victoria Aarons explores Jewish storytelling in A Measure of Memory: Storytelling and Identity in American Jewish Fiction. Arnold Krupat’s Ethnocriticism: Ethnography History Literature investigates similar issues in Native American fiction, and Amy Nauss Millay’s work on Spanish American fiction is documented in Voices from the Fuente Viva: The Effect of Orality in Twentieth-Century Spanish American Narrative. Framing Ethnicity puts Italian American fiction into dialogue with these other studies.
II. MIGRANT STORYTELLERS: NARRATING THE SELF
in Helen Barolini’s *Umbertina*
and Carole Maso’s *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat*

Italian American novelists interrogate and shape ethnicity through narrative conventions that range from embedded texts-within-the-text to unreliable narrators to folkloric structures. There is always a tension between the individual and the ethnic community, and novelists focus on a variety of points between self and transnational community. As subsequent chapters will address, novelists like Tina De Rosa present a portrait of a local Italian American enclave refracted through a modernist lens, while others like Mario Puzo utilize debates about authorship and the figure of the writer to convey ethnic experience in a broader American landscape.

In this chapter, two Italian American women writers interrogate ethnic identity by depicting women on the move who construct their own sense of selfhood through a combination of oral storytelling and journal writing. Helen Barolini’s *Umbertina* (1979) and Carole Maso’s *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat* (1994) construct a gendered ethnic identity through the stories their characters tell about themselves orally and in writing. Each novel explores the figure of the storyteller, but instead of a *cantastorie* or public teller of stories who entertains and teaches an audience, these characters move their narration to the private sphere that takes the form of daily journals and representations of intimate conversations. These
fictional frames anchor the characters’ self-constructed ethnic identities within their ceaseless migration and shape ethnicity to depict each woman’s trouble with finding a place within nation. As Qadri Ismail writes about the transnational condition: “Women cannot find home in nation.” (qtd in Strehle 25). For the characters in Barolini’s *Umbertina* and Maso’s *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat* the personal search for “home” becomes the larger unattainable search for “homeland” that links the imagined community of nation to ethnic identity.

After World War II, when Italian Americans attained social mobility and education, they began to travel back to Italy in large numbers as students and tourists. By the beginning decades of the twenty-first century, the trip back to Italy by the second, third, and even the fourth generation of Italian Americans has become a staple of popular texts such as the novels in Adriana Trigiani’s *Big Stone Gap* trilogy and television shows like *Everybody Loves Raymond* or *The Sopranos*. While these texts often take a simplistic view of how individuals are inspired by the journey and the experience of returning to the place their Italian ancestors left behind, Barolini and Maso wrestle with darker complexities and consequences in their novels.

Three components intersect in *Umbertina* and *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat* and show how Italian American identity is constructed differently for women who migrate. Each writer utilizes migration narratives combined with representations of oral storytelling and a text-within-the-text—a fictional notebook or diary, the traditionally feminine genre used in fiction and in life-writing. In a sense, every novel about migration can be read as a novel about identity. Susan Roberson calls on Adrienne Rich’s construction of place in “Blood, Bread and Poetry” when she writes that Rich suggests we find “ontological and epistemological
groundings in location, that who we are and how we look at and come to know the world are to a large degree fashioned by the world” (6). If you want to change your life, the old adage goes, the easiest thing to do is to move to a new location. American literature is filled with narratives of men who light out to new places in order to reinvent themselves or to escape the constraints of their surroundings, but there are fewer stories about women on the road. Nina Baym has analyzed the myth of achieving “complete self-definition” in the American wilderness against society and has charted how the myth evolved over time, but is still oriented in spatial terms. “[B]y the twentieth century” Baym states, “the myth has been transmuted into an avowedly hopeless quest for unencumbered space,” “the evocation of flight for its own sake,” or as “the pathetic acknowledgement of loss” (11). Baym argues that critics have constructed the myth of individual mobility as essentially male and excluded discussion of women’s narratives that configure movement differently. When women write of migrations and escapes, Roberson argues that “women’s narratives of movement” do more than present “the ‘M-factor’ of the American character— ‘movement, migration, mobility’ — with a slightly feminine angle.” Instead, these types of narratives “discover the traumas, the costs, and the rewards of movement, migration and displacement that accrue to women” (4). In other words, women writers explore the consequences of migration not as an adventurous attempt to escape society, but as a way to critique society’s impact. The characters in the novels by Barolini and Maso struggle with these consequences in private journals and in public orations, and in the process accept the conflicts inherent in their “movements.” Janis Stout characterizes this genre in a slightly different manner, naming these types of books “narratives of departure”; she writes: “In making their departures, women assume the role of subjects in their own stories rather than objects sought and exchanged by men. Leaving the warehouses of domesticity in which their
value is stored, they claim the right to establish their own systems of valuation” (3). Stout focuses on how the women of the narratives establish individual standards as they change their circumstances and location. In these two novels by Barolini and Maso, it is through their storytelling that the characters construct themselves as subjects and examine the rewards and consequences of their lives on the move.

Movement and migration dominate each novel. In *Umbertina*, three distinct generations of women, represented by Umbertina, Marguerite and Tina, move their lives between numerous places in Italy and the United States. The matriarch Umbertina immigrates to the United States in 1880s with her husband and children, spends several years in the harsh tenements of New York City, then moves upstate and opens a wholesale grocery business. The second part of *Umbertina*, follows Umbertina’s granddaughter Marguerite, a restless young women. She graduates from school, elopes and divorces within a matter of months, then travels to Italy to take classes. In Italy, she marries an older poet with whom she has children, and then moves back and forth between the U.S. and Italy depending on his job. Unhappy in her marriage, she takes a lover, becomes pregnant, and drives her car off a mountain. The last section of the novel takes up the story of Marguerite’s daughter Tina as she struggles with the aftermath of her mother’s death and her own migratory existence between Italy and the U.S. In *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat*, the second novel examined in this chapter, a writer from New York moves to France on a fellowship and then travels around the countryside. The American writer named Catherine spends a long summer in France writing a novel about an American writer living in France. Also divided into three parts, part one details Catherine’s string of erotic encounters as she travels through France and works on her next novel. Catherine’s brother died in the United States of A.I.D.S., and just before she departed, she
broke up with her lover named Lola. In the second part of the novel, she enters into an intense sexual affair with a man named Lucien, writes in her notebook, and receives letters from Lola asking her to come back. She also strikes up a friendship with an older expatriate woman named Sylvia Byrd. The last part of the novel illustrates Catherine’s final breakdown into despair over all that she has lost, and the slow disintegration of her relationship with Lucien. At the end, she kills herself in the fountain of the public square where he works. Although Maso’s character travels to France on a writing grant, aligning the novel with elements of expatriate narratives or travel literature, *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat* also belongs to the long tradition of immigration and migration narratives that use representations of storytelling to interrupt the present action. When characters tell or write stories about themselves, they shape the boundaries of the self as Jerome Bruner has claimed: “Telling oneself about oneself is like making up a story about who and what we are, what’s happened and why we’re doing what we’re doing” (64). In other words, the story establishes the value and meaning of one’s travels, actions, and activities. Like Barolini, Maso constructs ethnic identity through story, and although Maso’s character Catherine does not specifically choose an Italian American ethnic identity, the construction of her American identity functions to critique nation in a way that compares with Barolini’s critique.

A. STORYTELLING IN UMBERTINA

Barolini focuses much attention and detail on landscape and place in *Umbertina*. The first section, “Part One: Umbertina 1860-1940” which follows the “Prologue,” can be read as a traditional immigration narrative. First generation immigrant, Umbertina leaves her Calabrian village of Castagna in the last decades of the 1800s, spends several years in the tenements of
New York City, moves again to upstate Cato, where afterward she and her family buy or build new dwellings for home and business. Barolini keeps Umbertina focused on establishing place and home. When Umbertina leaves Castagna she connects place with purpose; Barolini writes: “She saw how those who left their homes were truly without place or meaning or protection” and “Uprooted, they were set loose from their land and their people” (50). Having experienced the loss of place when she left Italy, Umbertina successfully creates new and lasting ties for her family in Cato. But, as Roberson suggests of women and migration narratives, despite substantial success after early years filled with hunger, poverty and death, the relocation and Umbertina’s “uprooting” also have tragic consequences in the long run. Writing about the self’s ability to see the shape of its own activities, philosopher Adriana Cavarero asks, “does the course of every life allow itself [to] be looked upon in the end like a design that has meaning?” (1). At the end of her life, having achieved great financial security, Umbertina asks Cavarero’s question and seeks a pattern in her travels from village to slum to town; from hovel to tenement to mansion; from Italy to the United States. The journey can seem random to the traveler still on the road.

Cavarero explains that the shape of the footprints left behind can only be seen “at the end, when whoever has drawn it with his life—or when other spectators looking from above—see the prints left on the ground” (1). Umbertina tries to determine the pattern of her path in her old age by reflecting on the meaning of her life. On a picnic in a landscape that reminds her of the Italian hills where she tended sheep as a young girl, she remembers the buildings where she created a thriving wholesaler business and raised a large family of children and grandchildren. However, in terms of her “selfhood,” there is something missing. Barolini writes:
For Umbertina the picnic scene was her lifetime spread before her. She sat in the meadow on the shore of the lake under the shade of a large leafy elm tree dressed in black in a warm summer day as she was always dressed in black when she sat in the kitchen at Rutger Street and waited for the foreign children of her own half-foreign sons and daughters to come in and greet her with their mumbled, memorized phrases of unintelligible Italian. (140)

While at home in the meadow and in the kitchen of the house she earned, she is alienated from her family members who have lost the Italian language and cannot speak to her. Though she is in a familiar place surrounded by familial people, she is alone with her stories. Barolini writes, “[A]s Umbertina sat under her tree and looked at her progeny, she knew bitterness as well as contentment. All that work and sacrifice that she and Serafino had known. Did any of these gay, chattering, well-dressed, and happy people around her know any of it?” (142-143). She desires that the family she has raised know the struggles she has had and reflect the meaning of those struggles back to her. She wants her life-story to have an audience, but there is no one who can comprehend her own account of her travels.

This desire for listeners is more than the bragging rights of the self-made captain of industry Umbertina has become. Every person regardless of his or her status desires the same according to Cavarero, who claims, “the pattern that every human being leaves behind is nothing but their life-story” (2). Throughout this first section of the novel, Umbertina tells folk stories to her young children, but when Umbertina wants to tell her own stories after the children have grown, she no longer has anyone who can sufficiently understand her Italian words. Without an audience that understands the story, her children and grandchildren are foreign to her, just as Marguerite later admits that Umbertina was the strange, foreign
grandmother. Barolini’s emphasis on the word “foreign” connotes “out of place” and indicates that Italy is the missing link. If ethnicity is a relationship, then storytelling can build that connection between narrator and audience. Jay Clayton writes that narrative’s performative dimension “enacts as well as means” and he states, “Just as the ritual process can have a transformative effect on its participants, so stories can change the person who becomes caught up in their charm” (98). Umbertina cannot tell stories of Italy or stories of how she struggled to adapt Italian traditions in America. If the children and grandchildren were able to hear and understand, her stories could enact the connection between them and they would enter into a relationship to Italian ethnicity constructed through Umbertina’s stories. Gioia Timpanelli explains the potential connection this way: “Stories, while particular to the people who tell them, unite us in the larger story we all share and live together.” (144). For the third and fourth generation ethnics, as Mary Waters points out, “One constructs an ethnic identification using knowledge about ancestries in one’s background. Such information generally comes from family members” and “[t]his information is selectively used in the social construction of ethnic identification within the prevailing historical, structural, and personal constraints” (19). If Umbertina’s children had understood the stories of Italy, they would have understood better their own connection to Italian ethnicity. This conflict plays out later in the novel when the granddaughter Tina learns more about Umbertina’s life in Italy and comes to accept her own identity as a combination of Italian and American. Without the stories, Umbertina remains as foreign to her children as they are to her.³

Beyond not being able to understand her words, even worse, Umbertina’s children do not understand the significance of her struggle. When her daughter complains of the fifty-mile drive necessary to visit for the annual picnic, Umbertina questions:

³
What did she know of real uprooting? Of leaving your birthplace and family to put an ocean and three thousand miles and no possibility of return between you? Of depriving yourself of your native air and sun and food and language in order to live in the land of strangers where even your grandchildren could not speak to you? (144-145).

Barolini uses the sociological vocabulary of the ethnic revival movement—words like “uprooting”—that argues for recovery of these details. That Umbertina’s children do not understand the meaning of the difficult obstacles she overcame causes her to question the significance of her own achievements. Self-doubt creeps in and turns into a critique of American definitions of success. She recalls that in Italy there is a “different benessere,” a “well-being of the total person—not just money, but spirit too” (145). This desire for value of spirit is linked to her desire to be able to tell her story and have it reflected back to her in her children and grandchildren. Cavarero writes of the narratable self’s need to experience the reflection: “The scene consists in the intersection of autobiographical narrations, which make sure of the result of the reciprocal biographical activity. Put simply, I tell you my story in order to make you tell it to me” (62). Umbertina desires to revise her story based on the “different benessere” to order to teach her children the value of her life in Italian terms, but is left unfulfilled. Barolini denies Umbertina the ability to tell her own story and hear it retold by stripping her of her audience. Umbertina asks:

Now, she wondered, who do I have to tell my story to?

No one. Not one of her sons and daughters, let alone her alien grandchildren. ....
She had won, but who could she tell the story to? At times the doubt came to her whether she really had won, after all (145).

Telling the story might have reinforced Umbertina’s faith in her own success, but without the audience to reflect back the heroic value of her struggles, she is left with questions and doubt. As Cavarero explains about the construction of value: “[T]he unifying meaning of a story, can only be posed, by the one who lives it, in the form of a question. Or perhaps in the form of a desire” (2). Without the audience of family and without the ability to write her story, Umbertina can only raise the question. Ultimately, Barolini gives the task of answering these questions to Umbertina’s progeny, Marguerite and Tina. Umbertina cannot see the design of her actions in life, just as Marguerite will not be able to see the meaning of her own movements. Marguerite will have to give shape to Umbertina’s life, as Tina will do for Marguerite. Throughout the three sections of Barolini’s novel, being unable to tell stories is as prevalent for the characters as their constant migration and movement.

B. **UMBERTINA’S FRAME AND EMBEDDED JOURNAL**

*Umbertina* begins at a point in time much later than the picnic, with a partial frame “Prologue” written in Marguerite’s point of view which contextualizes the Umbertina section of the novel as a story told to Marguerite’s Sicilian male psychiatrist. This “Prologue” establishes Marguerite as the narrator and indicates her distance and perspective to view the past. She also tries to apply this point of view to the present. Barolini writes of Marguerite:

She liked to be a spectator, an observer. That way she could put a frame around the parts she liked and discard the parts that didn’t come out well, the ugly parts. She could see something in sequence, see it whole and understand it. Rerun it,
clip it, splice it. What she really wanted was not to be in it herself, just to look on as the others performed: her parents, brothers, teachers, friends, lovers, husband and children. (10)

Barolini’s emphasis on “framing,” editing, and viewing recalls the self’s desire to create a unified meaning in the shape of story. Marguerite desires this unattainable life-story for herself, just as Umbertina does.

In the second section of the novel, “Part Two: Marguerite, 1927-1973,” Umbertina’s granddaughter Marguerite reverses the American immigrant journey and tries to escape the family ties that Umbertina has established, first, by going away to college, then by eloping with a “Nordic” medical student (157). After a hasty annulment and a shipboard romance, Marguerite lands in England to study, then follows another lover to the half-ruined, half-rebuilt, post-World War II Italy where she eventually marries a Venetian poet. Like the new bridges being built on the Arno, Marguerite is in the process of reconstructing her life. After the second marriage, however, Marguerite is just as restless as ever and keeps the family moving in constant flux between homes in the United States and Italy.

In the “Prologue,” Marguerite is living in Rome in a state of personal crisis. Barolini writes, “Marguerite Morosini, an American transplant filled with fears and desires ... was about to divorce her Italian husband of eighteen years so that she could start again” (5). From the beginning, Barolini emphasizes Marguerite’s ethnic identity as American. In the midst of this marital crisis she is drawn into thinking about Umbertina and later her parents. Of her mother and father, she tells the psychiatrist that each refused an Italian identity. Marguerite analyzes their situation and says that her father
was caught in a terrible trap; he couldn’t be either Italian like his father and mother or American like his models without feeling guilty toward one or the other side. And even now he doesn’t know how to be American while accepting his Italianness because it’s still shameful to him. So there’s conflict and bitterness. (19)

Because of her parents’ rejection of things Italian, she feels that she is connected to Italy only by Umbertina. She admits to the doctor, “‘You know, I’ve always suspected it was my grandmother Umbertina who brought me to Italy in the first place. But I’ve never even taken the time to go see where she came from. I’ve never found her’” (18). By telling the story of her family, she begins to ask questions about her own journey: “‘And then my childhood, my family, all those years growing up, marrying, until I’m here talking with you. What has it all been but a trying to fit myself into abstractions, trying to live everyone else’s idea of what my life should be. And while I lived it I couldn’t see it—it was all written in an invisible ink that’s only now coming into sight’” (19). As hero of the story she cannot see the story clearly until the psychiatrist reflects it back to her. Barolini ends the “Prologue” when the doctor invites Marguerite to talk not about herself but about Umbertina. While the mimetic rhetoric of dialogue and scene decrease in the section about Umbertina, there are diegetic indicators especially at the beginning of the section that suggest Marguerite is narrating “Part One: Umbertina, 1860-1940.” In the frame of the “Prologue,” Barolini allows Marguerite the distance and point of view to give shape to Umbertina’s actions and construct the life-story she desired but could not produce for herself. The “Prologue’s” context of a therapy session positions Marguerite’s narration as an exploration of Marguerite’s life, history and selfhood.
Robert Viscusi has addressed the idea that the narration in Part One mythologizes the grandmother’s life and claims:

The heroine of Helen Barolini’s *Umbertina* is a Calabrian grandmother whose life the narrator very fully imagines, all the while making it clear that the grandmother spoke no English and the narrator no Italian, so that the entire recollection is a charged imagining rather than a history, not a record but self-consciously a myth. (276)

That is, Marguerite’s identity is invested in a myth of origins constructed as immigrant social mobility and economic success without Umbertina’s cultural and linguistic assimilation. The myth Marguerite constructs is one of success with ethnic difference sustained. While Barolini does not directly state that Umbertina’s section is Marguerite’s narration to the Sicilian psychiatrist, there are oral storytelling characteristics used within the section to create a legend or a myth of Umbertina in the oral tradition. In the opening paragraph of the section, Barolini writes: “In the village, people said of Umbertina that she had character right from the womb. ‘She’ll be the man of her family,’ they said” (24); the phrasing implies the village has been telling stories about her since her birth.

As she does with Umbertina, Barolini constructs Marguerite in connection to place; however, she is constantly eluding her ties to it. Her “Senior Banquet” place-card reads, “‘Someday you’ll find your place in the world,’” and Barolini repeats several times that “Marguerite still had not found her place” (154). Without connection to place, Marguerite is constantly moving from task to task, from lover to lover, from location to location. In her actions and relocations, she is similar to the heroic Ulysses of Homer’s *Odyssey* who Cavarero uses as an example of a character so caught up in “the present of the action” he or she does not
understand the meaning of the event until “the discontinuous times of that happening come
together in a story” (18). Always moving on to the next task in the next place, her movements
seem irrational to her Cato family and school friends who give her the nickname “Mad
Marguerite.”

The “Prologue” also introduces Marguerite’s notebooks into the novel. Barolini shows
how Marguerite writes down dreams, actions, stories and notes to read over and discuss with
the psychiatrist during their sessions. If oral stories need an audience to exist, written stories
can circumvent the absence. Umbertina did not read or write; she took her letters and
documents to the social worker, her paesani, and then her children (103). She needed the live
audience to make meaning of her stories. Marguerite, a college graduate, can write her stories
down and function as her own audience. The narratable self’s desire to have its story reflected
back is in part satisfied in the written text, and her doctor gives her the opportunity based on
her journal, “‘Never mind your notebook... Tell me what you remember without reading’” (14).
When she is without a place and without an audience, in Barolini’s novel, Marguerite uses the
notebooks for self-narration. After Marguerite dies, in the last section that focuses on
Marguerite’s oldest daughter Tina, the daughter discovers that her mother has kept notebooks
and diaries all her life (310). Earlier, in “Part Two: Marguerite, 1927-1973,” Barolini interrupts
the past tense third person omniscient point of view narration of Marguerite’s story with
Chapter Sixteen, written completely in the first-person present tense. Although Barolini does
not mark this section of the text as a diary by using conventions such as dates, the text presents
a chronological combination of actions, abbreviations, thoughts and opinions that match the
style of the later quotations that both of Marguerite’s daughters read over as her diary in the last
section of the novel. Chapter Sixteen, then, narrated in the first-person point of view, should be read as Marguerite’s journal and exists as a text-within-the-text.

The diary or journal as a form is considered by a number of critics as being “particularly conducive” to women and is studied for “the ways in which such narratives inscribe the self” (Bunkers and Huff 5,7). Focusing on the daily activities of life, Bunker and Huff claim that in practice, “diarists lay bare power relations, use their writing to transform themselves and their culture, and shape their diaries to express the variety of women’s experience” (8). Barolini’s use of Marguerite’s diary as a text-within-the-text puts Umbertina in company with other second wave feminist projects, particularly the recovery and publication of women’s diaries such as those by Virginia Woolf or Sylvia Plath and the other novels utilizing the form like Doris Lessing’s The Golden Notebook (1962) and Dorothy Bryant’s Ella Price’s Journal (1972). Barolini uses Marguerite’s notebooks as a kind of portable secret audience, for only after Marguerite’s death, her daughters discover that she has written consistently in the notebooks without their knowledge and moved the journals from house to house over the years. The daughters doubt that even their father knows about the notebooks (309).

The fictional diary of Chapter Sixteen in a sense closes the frame started by the “Prologue.” There, at the opening, Barolini introduces the marital crisis and the possibility of divorce between Marguerite and Alberto. At the end of Chapter Fifteen before the text-within-the text begins, Marguerite reports to the psychiatrist that the legal separation is complete. After signing the paperwork and bidding her husband good-bye, Marguerite “walked across the bridge from the Palazzo di Giustizia and stopped at the first bar that had a telephone. She called Dr. Verdile. ‘It’s done,’ she said” (200). For Marguerite, nothing has happened until she narrates the event. Barolini begins the fictional journal immediately after the phone call. She
uses the “Prologue” to provide a distance and perspective through which to frame the life-story of Umbertina, but she embeds the diary text-within-the-text to disrupt the expectations of a similar unified meaning for Marguerite, whose life is in media res. Barolini uses Chapter Sixteen as a break in other ways as well. Marguerite records bits of dialogue, quotes from books, descriptions of places, feelings and opinions. The journal reads as both fragmented and chronological. In the chapter, Barolini switches from telling the reader about Marguerite, to showing what Marguerite experiences with the immediacy of the first person point of view. Marguerite has broken up her marriage and evaded the conventional expectations of the patriarchal society; she leaves her husband for herself and not for another lover, which would be more acceptable to Alberto (202). The journal rhetorically interrupts the novel’s established aesthetic conventions and narrative structure, which in turn disrupts the readers’ expectations.

This chapter also stands alone as the only section in the novel where Barolini depicts Marguerite in the United States as an adult. Marguerite self-consciously follows the path that Umbertina took in the previous century and travels during the Easter holiday, traditionally a religious holiday symbolic of resurrection and rebirth; she writes, “Going back, taking the immigrant’s route, seeking my fortune in the New World. Mad Marguerite, the end-product, recapitulating the experiences and history of my ancestors” (201). “Recapitulating” is repeated from the first line of the chapter, “Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny” and refers to a kind of biological repetition of which Marguerite imagines herself the “end-product.” Marguerite implies a biological return to Umbertina as well as a physical return to place, as she follows Umbertina’s path from Italy to the “New World” of America. It is also return to origins that reflects a return to self, as Stout explains, “The desire for a unified self entails the desire for a return to a place perceived as being one of origination” (xv). In the earlier chapters,
Marguerite leaves the United States to escape the expectations of her family, but now she describes this trip as a return home to the beginning and repeats, “Going back to start again” (201). The legal separation is one step toward gaining a unified identity for Marguerite, and she believes that in reconnecting with Umbertina’s journey she will return to her roots with the freedom to choose what she does next.⁷

Not only is the trip a return to home, it is a return to homeland, and instead of the fearful optimism with which the immigrants of Umbertina’s generation traveled, Marguerite levels a critical eye at America in these journal pages. There is no nostalgic longing for hearth and family. In this text-within-the-text, Barolini allows Marguerite to explore her relationship with the United States through observation and narrates her story through the descriptions of her activities during the Easter trip.⁸ Barolini politicizes the daily experiences of Marguerite by including her detailed observations about things as disparate as her husband’s underwear, Broadway musicals, frozen dinners, and racial politics. The quotidian randomness of the journal reflects what Rebecca Hogan claims: “[d]iaries are not so much inclusive because they contain everything from a given day as they are inclusive in the sense that they do not privilege ‘amazing’ over ‘ordinary’ events, in terms of scope, space or selection” (103). Therefore when Barolini renders Marguerite’s journal, she records an array of dissatisfaction with family, friends, consumerism, literary publishing, counter-culture, and politics. Little events like going to the dentist sit side by side in her journal with visiting old college roommates and meeting famous writers, and Barolini allows Marguerite to opine about all of it.

The self doubt that Barolini gives Marguerite throughout the novel when she talks to men such as her husband, her psychiatrist, or the circle of Italian poets and writers is replaced in the Chapter Sixteen journal with an energetic, confident, critical voice. Marguerite in
America is lighter, smarter, and more expressive. The use of language in this chapter is somewhat playful and sophisticated. She is at home in the language; her descriptions sharp and judgmental. She describes her old college roommate: “She stands there crunching an apple, skinny, ferret-faced, eye goggling, grinning like she’s been taught, blathering on and on” (205). Instead of the insecurity she projects in Italy, in her journal descriptions she views herself as more sophisticated and relevant. “We talk. I suggest. They listen,” she writes about herself when talking to editors, and she views herself as professionally connected, “visible” and powerful (207). In vivid contrast to her passive acquiescence of the Italian literati at her husband’s gatherings where she feels out of place and belittled, she details her dinner in New York with the famous novelist, “Piero Paco” and analyzes him, confident of her insight:

He looks like a massive gangster but turns out to be a plain nice guy with a lot of folksy stories and no complexes. He doesn’t feel guilty about blacks, doesn’t care about elevating Italo-American prestige. He’s no missionary for wops. No gripes about the Establishment. He just decided in the best American way to write a book that would make half a million bucks because he was tired of being ignored. (208)

Her observations contain nuances of vernacular language (“wops,” “gripes,” “bucks”) and address delicate questions about the racial situation of the late 1960s. She’s critical of Paco, admires him at the same time, and captures the contradictions she witnesses. In a similar way, she deplores the consumerism she experiences, but also delights in it; “America the Bellyful,” and “America the Blissful” she writes after shopping excursions (207, 210). She disagrees with the way her father measures success by counting the money in his vault, “America the Dutiful,” but admires his ability to amass such a fortune (209). The refrain of the language celebrates as
it critiques. By most standards, Marguerite displays that she is at home in the United States, and her focus on place allows her to level a critical lens at America. As Edward Said writes, “Nationalism is an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage. It affirms the home created by a community of language, culture and customs, and, by doing so, it fends off exile, fights to prevent its ravages” (176). Her ability to evaluate how the U.S. system functions, in fact, reflects her comfort in and acceptance of the national imagined community of America. After the awkward discomfort she describes about living in Italy to her Italian psychiatrist, the journal, written in America, projects Said’s sense of belonging. Inoculated by her dexterity and familiarity with the American scene reflected in her journals, Marguerite chooses to leave and return to Italy. Her parents try to get her to stay in Cato, arguing that “This is your country. You and the girls are Americans, after all” and telling her “to think of the children” (209). She replies, “No Great White Father, you’re wrong. First me, this time” (209). She chooses self over family, community, home, or national homeland. The address to “Great White Father” also implies a rejection of patriarchal conventions again, and instead of taking advantage of the comfort and luxury in her father’s mansion, she chooses the awkward and uncertain connections she has in Italy. The text-within-the-text allows Barolini to show Marguerite’s complex relationship with “America” to herself; privately she claims nationhood and then publicly she rejects it by returning to Italy. Having articulated her understanding of self in America to her journal, Marguerite would rather feel like an American in Italy than an Italian in the United States. Her constant movement between Italy and the United States is a choice not to fully accept either nation.

C. ENDING THE STORY: MARGUERITE
Barolini’s Marguerite cannot see the shape of her own life. However, just as Catherine will in Maso’s novel, Marguerite chooses to end her life, and in how she ends her life, she does exert effort to influence the meaning and shape of the stories told about her after her death.

Barolini writes beyond Marguerite’s ending and in the last third of the novel that focuses on Marguerite’s daughter Tina, Barolini softens the pessimistic ending of Marguerite’s suicide. After Marguerite’s return to Italy from the United States, she moves to Florence to work and contemplates an affair. When her dissatisfaction with life as a wife and mother returns, Barolini again characterizes her unhappiness as dislocation: “She was part of the permanently dispossessed. She couldn’t belong completely in the States anymore and had never belonged completely in Europe” (212). She returns to Rome and her marriage only to start an affair with another married man. The affair produces a pregnancy and in desperation, Marguerite runs her car off of a mountain road. As Maso does with Catherine in The American Woman in the Chinese Hat, Barolini ends Marguerite’s section of the novel, Part Two, with her suicide.

In the last section of Barolini’s novel, Marguerite’s husband eulogizes her using the exact terms of her displacement. He claims to quote her words, “‘She said she had no country, nor any religion,’ he intoned, ‘and yet she was one of the most religious spirits I’ve ever known, with a purity and candor that were both vulnerable and invincible. She was restless, as the person in search, the person of sensitivity must always be’” (336). In the public oration, her husband shapes the story told about her and defines her by her lack of place. Yet previous to the suicide Barolini does depict Marguerite finally at “home” briefly with her lover. In Chapter Nineteen, the little apartment where she works on translations and photography is also where she meets up with her lover. Marguerite desires a permanent commemoration of the apartment
to publicly reflect the story. She tells him: “‘[W]hen we’re both famous, they’ll put a plaque on this building to say that here we loved each other. But not a short plaque, a long one covering the entire front wall’” (244). Like Catherine in *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat*, Marguerite will never give up the desire to both shape her own life-story and have it reflected back to her. At this moment though, instead of the journal, she desires the public record written in lasting stone on the wall. She details for the lover what the plaque will say, and text spans the entire page. As she does in the Chapter Sixteen journal, Marguerite includes a mixture of people from the building and describes their accomplishments mixing the ordinary with the more significant. She states that the plaque will say: “that in this palace, a former dépendance of the princely Spada family there lived from the time of its renovation the following occupants:” and then begins the long list of building tenants (244). Mimicking the official language of historical markers, Marguerite goes on to include all the people who live in the building as though she is part of a thriving community. She details an Italian deputy, a graduate student, a French dancer, an American guidance counselor, two call girls, the cleaning lady, a diplomat’s son “and on the roof, above the top-floor apartment of the famous journalist Angela Cambio, the American photographer Marguerite Morosini, who was made love to by the illustrious writer Massimo Bontelli” (244). In this international community she still identifies herself as American. As her monologue continues uninterrupted, Marguerite tells her lover that the plaque will declare: “This was the moment of the palazzo’s chief glory” and then will explain the interior details of the rug, food, hours, stove, cushions, clothes and noises in the apartment. The plaque Marguerite describes imagines the private voice of the journal made public and literally written in stone to mark the spot. For one fleeting moment, Marguerite finds
her place in story, and seeks to commemorate it in writing this time not in the notebook, but on the wall. However, when her next crisis ensues, she is unable to imagine a different story.

In the last section of the novel, “Part Three: Tina, 1950-,” Marguerite’s two daughters are able to read the lessons from Marguerite’s life-story and at least avoid the errors that Marguerite faced. Although both daughters continue to move between geographic sites, they find ways of building relationships to counter the effects of dislocation. The youngest daughter Weezy finds a home among women with a political cause and joins a feminist collective. Like her mother, she moves around Italy and Europe, but stays connected to Tina. Tina goes on her own journey south to Castagna in search of Umbertina’s story, reads her mother’s journals, and earns a graduate degree in the classics specializing in the literature of Dante. Tina is able to rewrite her own story several times in this last section, and is able to do as Jerome Bruner explains: “we constantly construct and reconstruct ourselves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and we do so with the guidance of our own memories of the past and our own hopes and fears for the future” (64). Amid all the stories of others— the family stories and story quilts of Umbertina’s immigrant generation, the quotidian events in Marguerite’s written journals, the themes of her father’s poetry, the ancient tales of Dante, and her new husband’s shipwreck legends of the eastern seaboard— Tina finds a way to pick and choose her own narrative. She draws from all these stories to determine and integrate her ethnic and her national identity; something that Marguerite was unable to do.

D. STORYTELLING IN THE AMERICAN WOMAN IN THE CHINESE HAT

While Barolini uses the text-within-the-text in just one chapter, Carole Maso’s The American Woman in the Chinese Hat on the other hand integrates the convention of the
fictional journal from the very first pages to both characterize Catherine as a writer and make her desire for self-narration one of the main issues of the book.¹²

Maso herself has multiple ethnicities in her family history and although clearly defined Italian American characters appear in her first novel *Ghost Dance*,¹³ there are none in this novel. Maso does not give Catherine a last name¹⁴ or any other “standard” ethnic markers. However, just as Barolini’s novel is about the recovery of Umbertina’s story as it impacts Marguerite and Tina, Maso’s work particularly in *The American Woman* recovers and transforms into contemporary times the emotional and symbolic experience of uprooting and loss. As Mary Frances Pipino has argued, novels with a submerged ethnicity focused on traumatic loss can “also be read as the response of an uneasily assimilated immigrant to the contradictory demands of two cultures” (69).¹⁵ Also focused on loss and recovery, Roseanne Giannini Quinn has argued for reading *Ava*, another Maso novel without Italian American characters, “as a reclamation of a lost Italian cultural legacy where an essential component of Italianità is that it encompasses and is intertwined with the recovering of a woman-centered culture which has suffered modes of destruction and erasure” (94). *The American Woman* like Barolini’s *Umbertina*, examines the relationships between self and migration, as well as the connections and conflicts women have with the conventions of patriarchal power structures. While there are suggestions that Catherine may have some affinity for Italianità (references to Italian food, Italian names for cities in France, and Italian and Italian American film directors) the other ideological conflicts she has with the constraints of national identity connect much more directly and engage in a dialogue with Barolini’s characters and use of form. As a migration novel, *The American Woman* is much more experimental than *Umbertina* and takes place ten years later in the mid-1980s, but taken together, their use of the fictional diary-within-
the-text both speak to the “erasure” and recovery of story and its role in defining ethnic social identity.

Maso’s Catherine has won a writing grant, and in the wake of her brother’s death, she leaves New York and a long-term relationship with a woman named Lola. The present-time action that structures the novel represents Catherine writing in bars and cafés as she grieves and enters into a string of relationships, many sexual, with the people she meets in the coastal towns of Southern France. This movement from relationship to relationship is punctuated by Maso with repetitive stories, memories, bits of letters that she receives from home and entries that she writes in her notebook. Just as Barolini’s characters move from place to place, Catherine moves from New York to France, then city to city, then sexual encounter to sexual encounter. The Tarot card she turns up indicates she is a “a moving soul in the universe, a life in transit” (101). She relocates to France on a writing grant in an attempt to escape her grief but also to start a new writing project. This symbolic and literal movement is what aligns Maso’s *The American Woman* with Barolini’s *Umbertina*, as well as other migration novels that depict a return to Europe from North America like Maria Ardizzi’s *Made in Italy* (1999) (Canada-Italy), Antonia Pola’s *Who Can But the Stars?* (1957) (United States-Italy) and Mario Puzo’s *The Dark Arena* (1955) (United States-Germany). In addition to the movement of her characters, by continuously and seamlessly interrupting the narrative present with embedded memories of the past and notebook entries which record the present action, Maso exposes the effects of relocation on Catherine who retreats into story itself.

Like Umbertina and Marguerite, Catherine embodies Cavarero’s desire for self-narration which influences how she understands her self-identity. Maso combines the narrative action with the fictional journal-within-the-text to the extent that *The American Woman*
presents Catherine as a character who obsessively writes down what happens, sometimes as it happens. Similar to Umbertina’s Marguerite in her Chapter Sixteen journal, Catherine is able to write out her story so that she fulfills the desire to self-narrate and craft her narrative into a shape and meaning that she can then potentially re-read in reflection, though she rarely does in the novel. Maso continuously builds and breaks the narrative frame as Catherine writes and tells stories— the notebook collapses into the action and Catherine as storyteller collapses into the story.

The title of The American Woman in the Chinese Hat comes from a description of Catherine. Variations of the description are repeated throughout the novel: “I am known as the American Woman in the Chinese Hat who writes” (7), and “I am known in town as the American Woman in the Chinese Hat with the notebook who cries” (46). Working on a novel, Catherine wanders around the French coast writing and drinking poolside or in cafes during the day. At night she has affairs; she sleeps with a poet, a fascist, an artist’s model, a firefighter, and a trio of scalpers at a Michael Jackson concert. In Part Two, she embarks on an intense sexual affair with Lucien, a man who sells books and postcards in the town’s fountain square. Another older English woman named Sylvia Byrd befriends her and the two talk about the many expatriate writers Sylvia has known in France since before World War II. Despite Lucien and Sylvia’s efforts to help her, the affair with Lucien intensifies as Catherine descends into alcoholism, grief, and mental illness. By the end of the novel, Maso has erased the phrase that makes up the title. The American Woman has taken off her hat, destroyed her writer’s notebook, burned her American passport, and opened her veins in a fountain, ending her narrative.
Although Maso’s novel is filled with the self-narration of Catherine’s notebook, Maso also represents Catherine telling stories to her friends and lovers in an effort to connect with them. In many cases the stories are repeated or expanded fragments that have appeared as Catherine’s memories both in and out of the notebook. For example:

“Where did you buy your chapeau?” someone asks her.
“A long way from here.”
“Oui?”
“In New York. In a place called Chinatown.”

Over French radio she hears Jesse Jackson delivering his address to the Democratic convention. It strikes her that he could come from nowhere but her country. “Keep hope alive. Keep hope alive. Keep hope alive,” he says. It makes her cry. She is homesick. She wants to go home to her.

In her notebook she writes: “One morning her American friends call.” I imagine American friends. It is necessary to believe in them. I am reliant on their existence.

In the Tribune it says that the MacArthur Fellows have been named. Jenny Holzer is picked to represent the USA at the Venice Bienalle. I think of my Jenny Holzer cap at home on the top shelf in my bedroom. “Protect me from what I want,” it says.

“It’s an odd time,” the paper says, “for George Bush to go fishing.”
My mother writes of a terrible heat wave. The polluted beaches. One fish dinner a week. How much I miss her. France seems filled with mothers to me, with daughters. (32)

The text moves between things she says, hears, writes, reads, remembers, feels, and imagines. Maso depicts Catherine’s mixing of French and English in these scenes, and often does not translate for the non-French speaking reader, but through repetition and variation of phrasing, captures the experience of someone learning a second language. Just as Marguerite and her husband mix English and Italian to talk to one another, Catherine talks to Lucien with a
combination of languages, “‘I tell him a story, half in English, half in French.’ ‘Franglais,’ he says, wincing” (93). Unlike Umbertina’s inability to learn English, despite the obstacles and misunderstandings, Marguerite and Catherine attempt to overcome the language barriers to tell their stories. In both novels, learning the new languages echo the immigrant’s unsettling experience of language immersion and cause both confusion and paternalistic reactions from listeners. In *The American Woman* especially, Maso shows Catherine struggling with and resisting how she is perceived because of her fumbling French. In *Umbertina*, Marguerite absorbs her lack of fluency as another anxiety-provoking weakness she talks through in therapy.

The stories Catherine tells to Lucien serve to mythologize the events of their relationship and when she relates them to him, she adds the phrasing of fairytales or remakes each of them into imaginative characters such as mermaids, swans and sailors. She struggles with loss, and constructs stories about their daily activities to add weight and significance to their mundane activities; Maso writes:

“Je ne le crois pas,” he says. “Tell me a story.”

“There was once a young man in France who looked as if he had stepped out of a film by Truffault. He worked near a fountain and all day he’d dip his hands into the water, into the liquid light.” (121)

The stories are punctuated with “I say” which indicates she speaks and the narrative is not written in the notebook. The phrases and description are familiar to the reader as echoes of similar words and phrases Maso has written previously both as present-time narrative action and as lines that Catherine writes in her notebook. The stories often ritualize the connections between Catherine and others where no other connection exists. With Lucien, the stories
prefigure and intermingle with sexual encounters that further become part of the written notebook. At other times, Maso uses the indirect dialogue of the notebook to summarize stories told. The third person point of view\(^\text{18}\) generally indicates the switch to the notebook: “She tells him a story. Her mother taking her to ballet class five times a week. Her toes bleeding. Red feet. Red shoes. It’s not meant to be an excuse. She holds two red feet in her hands and weeps. He moves next to her. ‘Tell me the story again,’ he says” (135). Stories also recur in fragments and pieces to represent memories of Catherine’s life before she moves to France, and in fact reach back to her life with Lola or even farther into childhood. The oral storytelling functions similarly to Cavarero’s hero so caught up in “the present of the action” he or she does not understand the meaning of the event until “the discontinuous times of that happening come together in a story” (Cavarero 18). Like “Mad Marguerite” in Barolini’s *Umertina*, Catherine is thought irrational and given the new nickname “L’étrangeré” because of the constant moving from place to place, relationship to relationship, and, with Lucien, from story to story (137). As Catherine worsens, her ability to tell stories deteriorates until finally all she can produce is clichés. When Lucien begs for a story she replies miserably, “‘Once upon a time’” (195).\(^\text{19}\)

E. **THE AMERICAN WOMAN IN THE CHINESE HAT’S EMBEDDED JOURNAL**

Catherine carries her notebook everywhere as she does her Chinese hat. She writes at the bars, at the pool, even in bed—the notebook becomes another manifestation of her character in its physical presence. When Catherine cries, the “pages bleed” (56). She keeps it in bed with her and writes in it during sex; amid descriptions of “thrusting,” “leaning,” and “dipping
motions,” Catherine writes “It’s getting hard to describe this anymore. It’s getting more and more difficult.” After a few more paragraphs of sexual gymnastics Maso writes:

He moves his hand to her throat as he thrusts harder and harder. “You’re choking me,” she says. “You’re choking me.” Then nothing. And I would like to help her, but I can’t.

The black book falls to the floor, and she looks up terrified. “Non. It has no meaning,” he says in English. (141).

The third person point of view indicates the notebook, and the switch to first person suggests that Catherine is commenting on what is happening. When the notebook falls to the floor it terrifies her more than the “choking.” The notebook is an extension of Catherine’s self. Lucien writes in her notebook, just as he marks Catherine’s body with bruises (90). He repeatedly writes “fin” and attempts to get her to stop writing. When she needs friends, she conjures them in writing: “In her notebook she writes: ‘One morning her American friends call.’ I imagine American friends. It is necessary to believe in them” (32). Whereas Marguerite’s journal recorded an interior monologue in Umbertina, Catherine’s notebook represents a rapidly deteriorating self in conflict. Other critics have focused on the notebook’s effect on selfhood. Nicole Cooley claims that Catherine’s notebook is a “division” that “disrupts the notion of a single, individual speaking subject” and that “[t]he movement within the point of view in this novel also suggests that identity is mobile, shifting and irreducible to a single term” (187).

Jeffrey DeShell also writes about the shift from first person to third as a “split” or “schism”: “This change is not permanent, but a separation has occurred, a distance has been established, the distance between ‘I’ and ‘she,’ a distance between one who writes and one who is written, between one who describes and one who is described” (194). DeShell claims that despite this
split, and because of it, when Catherine destroys the notebook, Maso represents an “off stage” act of violence. Catherine is already dead, and her subsequent suicide is redundant. However, in the cracked mirror of the text-within-the-text, similar to how she imagined her American friends, Catherine describes the character’s suicide in her notebook much earlier as she was initially going to include it in her novel. Maso writes:

   In my cahier I write: “She stepped into the fountain and sat there in water, one leg then the other—and the beautiful stranger looked on.

   “At first she was self-conscious. At first she minded her half-wet skirt; people were gasping, she could hear them, their human sounds, but they were soon replaced by water. She went down to its dazzling center. It was not black water, as she had imagined; it was rouge. How strange. Like wine. But she was dying into it undeniably.”(46)

Unlike her character as narratable self, the novelist can see the unified life-story as fiction, and she can construct everything about that life-story as well. Catherine as novelist attempts to see her own life-story by writing the novel about what happens to herself, but as Catherine becomes more and more mentally unstable the textual divisions between the self, the character, the notebook, and her oral storytelling dissolve. Whereas Marguerite uses the journal in an attempt to clarify and explain herself, Catherine’s notebook creates even more confusion.

   Just as Maso’s use of the journal collapses the separation between story and storyteller, her use of Catherine’s American identity collapses questions about ethnicity and nation. Complicated by relocation to France, the hybrid ethnicities that take precedence in Maso’s first novel Ghost Dance are consolidated into an American identity in The American Woman in the Chinese Hat. Even though Maso does not represent Catherine as specifically Italian American
or as any other white ethnic, her choice of calling herself American is very similar to Marguerite’s choice of thinking of herself primarily as American. However, that American-ness is marginalized in the new location of the French Riviera. Catherine is the American Woman in France, but she is qualified by the Chinese Hat and the notebook and the tears; Catherine narrates: “Except for the cahier, and the French workbook, and the Chinese hat and all the crying, I am just like a resident of Vence these days” (40). She imagines herself as a marginalized part of the community, and she is different from the French, as she is different from other Americans.20

As she keeps the notebook with her, Catherine is also rarely without the Chinese Hat. What image does the hat conjure for the reader? Maso does not ever describe the Chinese Hat, except for calling it Chinese. There are three types of hats which are distinctly Chinese: a flat straw peasant hat for blocking the sun,21 a black “Chairman Mao” cap with a brim, and a colorful silk pill-box cap. Each of these might stand out in a crowd. But regardless of what image the reader has, the historical connotations of the adjective “Chinese” are enough to indicate difference. The Chinese hat serves as a deliberate asterisk to Catherine’s American-ness, that is, by wearing the hat, Maso ethnically marks the American Woman. In addition, the Chinese hat signifies Catherine’s relationship with Lola, who purchased it for her many years before (31). The hat reminds her how Lola helped her through the illness and depression she suffered in the U.S. Catherine writes in the notebook: “But I have not forgotten, Lola, the fish or the road or the red sign we bled by. I have not forgotten your kindness or the way you helped me get out of bed. Or how so often the dark world seemed radiant in your presence. Or the hat… And how life does not seem like real life without you” (119). Linked to her American identity, the Chinese hat also denotes the ten years of life with Lola in the United States.
Catherine wears her “heart” on her head (as it were), deliberately qualifying the American woman of the title as non-hetero-normative. Together with sexual encounters she has with women, men and multiple partners, Catherine resists the sexual conventions demanded by patriarchal hegemony to a much greater degree than Barolini’s Marguerite. Several times Catherine loses the Chinese hat, but it always returns to her and is an indelible mark on the American woman. When she burns her passport destroying the “American” of the title, she finally takes off the hat (190). The American passport and the Chinese hat disappear simultaneously.

Maso further differentiates Catherine from the other Americans both in France and in the United States, although this is a progression that develops over the course of the text. Catherine’s of fluency in French masks her exceptionalism and verbal talents to her French friends and lovers who find it hard to believe that she is a writer. She narrates: “She realizes that her genius is hidden from him by the barrier of language. She sounds like an idiot, she realizes that, or a grown child” (133). Catherine’s dislocation in language is a familiar part of the immigration narrative, but Maso further troubles Catherine with this specific geography. The French can’t tell the difference between an English accent and an American one (108). There is a slow erasure or blurring of Catherine’s American identity in these little slippages. Just as Marguerite’s journal in Umbertina mixes incidents of daily life with larger public issues, Maso represents Catherine’s desire for American culture and politics in the notebook and through the letters from her mother and Lola: “Letters from home talk about the intense, the frightening heat. The greenhouse effect. The polluted beaches” (103). She goes to the Michael Jackson concert in a nearby town and is proud of him: “Sing, dance, Michael, show the French this night. He is an American and the woman is surprised to feel some genuine
pride” (60). Catherine follows the French newspaper headlines about the 1988 American presidential election and the forest fires at Yellowstone National Park. She comments on George H.W. Bush, quotes the Reverend Jessie Jackson, and plans to vote by absentee ballot: “I picture the future election of George Bush … It will not surprise me I think. It will be just another in a series of betrayals and disappointments. ‘George Bush’ I say shaking my head. America. My poor doomed country” (104). Her comments to the French characters and the things she writes in her notebook reveal that, like Barolini’s Marguerite, she is at odds with the dominant American scene despite her interest, pride and concerns; Maso writes: “She tells [Lucien] there is no place for her in America anymore. She says the phone rings too much there. She says there is no hope” (103). Maso places this comment within the conversation about Ronald Reagan and George Bush, but as with all things American in this book, this comment can be read not only politically, but personally as well. Politically, sexually, Catherine complicates what the French think of Americans: she wears the Chinese Hat, she carries a notebook, she cries continually.

Maso connects the American Woman’s body to the notebook and the American passport. All three migrate, travel, and move across space and time to a new location. The passport is described as a tiny book, and like the notebook is destroyed by fire. The symbolic nature of the passport is carried over to Catherine’s body as Lucien names her nipple “the flower of America” and himself the “explorer.” Like the Chinese hat, the notebook and the passport qualify Catherine’s identity, mark her as different and are tools in her storytelling that she uses to construct the self. The burning of the passport connects both the notebook and the passport to Catherine’s sense of self:

She wants to feel something.
She takes from her pocket the thin book with gold letters. Holds it in her palm and laughs in the dangerous afternoon. It’s so small. Who has ever seen a book so small? She lights a match. “Ma forêt c’est secré,” he says. “Attention,” he says, laughing.

He reads “Passport.” He reads “United States of America.”

It’s so far.

She just wants to feel something. “Dit non a la drogue,” she says as they watch the blue book burn, as she waves good-bye, as she slips out of this last credential of self.

Love: as the songs from America said.

“Where is your cahier?” She scares him, this American.

“Gone,” she says. “All gone.”

She takes off her hat. They stare at the singed and ruined book.

“You will stay then?” he whispers.

She laughs. (190)

In Cavarero’s terms burning the passport destroys the “what” of the group identity and burning the notebook, just one of the relocated sites of Catherine’s stories, destroys the “who” of the individual self. By moving “the American Woman who writes” to France, Maso does what Cavarero calls changing the scene of narration which “takes on a political action” and raises the “possibility to imagine a relational politics that is attentive to who one is rather than what one is” (xxiii): Cavarero writes: “within the context of telling someone the story of his/her life, within the scene of a narrative relation, the focus is shifted from the generaliz[ed] qualities of those involved to the unique existents with whom the tales correspond” (xxiii). In other words, when stories are exchanged, group identifiers such as ethnicity or nationality shift to a focus on the individual storytellers and counter the group identity, shifting the “what” to “who.” In Maso’s text, the American Woman becomes Catherine. National identity is conflated with ethnicity, and the various historical and current boundaries to the concepts of nation and
ethnicity—legal, physical, political and social— collapse together as they are destroyed in Catherine’s death. Maso is complicating how to think about both ethnicity and nation identity. The question of “What is an American in France?” becomes the question “Who is Catherine in France?” Similar to Marguerite’s refusal to accept fully an Italian or American affiliation in Umbertina, Catherine is marginalized from both aspects of identity. The migration and “uprootedness” keep her from belonging and separate her on every level.

F. ENDING THE STORY: CATHERINE

Neither Barolini’s Marguerite or Maso’s Catherine is able to see the shape of their own lives. Both choose to end their lives, and in how they choose to end their lives, each does exert effort to influence the shape of the stories told about them after their deaths. In Maso’s The American Woman in the Chinese Hat, Catherine never escapes the personal or political desire for home nor the desire for a permanent sense of self. Near the end of the novel when Catherine is falling apart, Maso writes, “She can’t find the pattern. There had been one once. There had been a reason for things, but she had lost it. It happened in France. That’s all she can remember. But the design had been imposed; it had never been hers. How else to account for its disappearance seemingly overnight?” (157). She blames her uprooting on place and finds herself as perplexed as the newly arrived immigrant Umbertina. While she is still exchanging stories at this point in the novel, the stories are becoming more and more obscure for Lucien who tells her “You are not normal.” Like Marguerite’s grandmother near the end of her life in Barolini’s Umbertina, Catherine is alienated from an audience for her stories. “She tries to imagine a self that does not yearn. A changeless, a final, a permanent self.” (157-8). The notebook and the stories ultimately fail to make a place for her in the world.
Although the life-story is interrupted by the suicide and the notebook destroyed, Sylvia Byrd had been telling Catherine stories about expatriate writers throughout the summer. Earlier in her notebook, Catherine has already imagined and narrated her character’s death in the fountain. Along with her strange public behavior all summer, her violent end has assured her a place in Sylvia Byrd’s collection of tales about Dylan Thomas, Sylvia Plath, D.H. Lawrence and T.S. Eliot. The story of Catherine’s death in the town’s fountain is sure to resonate in the French village and back in the United States with family and friends. Because of her interest in the Sylvia Byrd’s stories as well as the recurring references to the films *The Last Emperor* and *Joan of Arc*, Catherine has been conscious of how the way one dies can define one’s life story. Cavarero explains that the hero will often take specific actions because of the possibility of story, and Catherine suicide, like Marguerite’s, is her attempt to fashion the shape of her story’s ending.

G. CONCLUSION

Novelists like Maso and Barolini start with the storyteller and self-identity. While Catherine and Marguerite try to escape the communities and the conditions they find intolerable such as the pain of loss and the constraints of family, they are not able to overcome the effects of their departures. In their restlessness, they suffer more. American ethnic and social identity is becomes a more generalized American identity which causes internal conflicts for the ethnic woman. Barolini and Maso explore these internal conflicts through the narrative convention of the journal-within-the-text, and show their characters attempt to fashion and shape an identity through self-narration when they have no audience to reflect the stories back to them. “The journal” as storyspace allows characters to try to contain and protect and ethnic
identity while “on the road,” although as Barolini and Maso demonstrate, movement and migration can complicate, change, or even destroy that sense of self as they do in these two novels.

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1 The latest example in television is the forthcoming season of MTV’s notorious series *The Jersey Shore*, which announced in January 2011 that the next season will be filmed in Italy.

2 In the first decades of the twentieth century, Umbertina’s children and grandchildren would have been discouraged from using the Italian language by schools and public institutions. See Nancy Carnevale’s linguistic history of pre-World War II use of language by Italian Americans during the height of the nativist Americanization campaigns; she writes, “The use of immigrant languages in any form was a particular target of anti-immigrant activity” (48).

3 An opposing example of how stories successfully construct a relationship to ethnic identity is in Tina De Rosa’s *Paper Fish*. In that novel, Grandma Doria tells Carmolina stories of her childhood in Italy and her journey to America. It is the grandmother’s stories which define Carmolina’s understanding of and relationship to Italy, and the meaning of Grandma Doria’s life story is reflected back to her in Carmolina’s appreciation of her stories. See Mary Jo Bona’s discussion of Grandma Doria’s storytelling in *Claiming a Tradition*, especially pages 152-154.

4 A relevant example of what Umbertina could have done from the field of memoir is Leonilde Frieri Ruberto’s *Such Is Life: Ma La Vita e Fatta Cosi*. According to Laura Ruberto’s Preface, Leonilde’s daughter thought her mother was happiest when she was telling stories about her life and urged her to write down some of those stories. Leonilde who completed the fourth grade in Italy, sat down in 1982 at the age of sixty-nine wrote her narrative in “a blend of standard Italian and dialect” in a spiral-bound school notebook (x).

5 The conflation of ethnic identity and national identity is a problem in both texts. Although his subject is the European Union, David Brown’s discussion of a “nested social identity” is useful; he writes, “Ethnic and national consciousnesses have frequently been theorized in ‘instrumentalist’ terms as collective identities employed by groups of individuals to defend their material and power interests against perceived threats. But this view has been supplemented and modified by recent ‘constructivist’ approaches, which depict the éthnie and the nation as ‘moral communities’ constructed in the course of social and political interactions in which the moral identity of the Us and the Other is repeatedly redefined (Yeros 1999). Two images emerge from the constructivist literature: the first of ethnic and national identities in flux and intertwining, as they are repeatedly renegotiated; the second is of ethnic and national identities that become ‘sticky’ and ‘sedimented over time,’ acting as ideological blinkers that
inhibit the flexibility of identity (Norval 1999:84)” (16). In Brown’s configuration, both novels subscribe to the conception of the ethnic and national identities as “in flux and intertwining” a model that is further emphasized by the ungrounded movement of the characters.

6 Based on an idea developed in the 1860s by German zoologist Ernst Haechel, “In plain English, the idea is that the history of an organism’s development (its ‘ontogeny’) repeats the evolutionary development of its species (‘phylogeny’). That is to say, if the evolutionary ancestors of human beings include fish and apes, then at different points in its growth a human embryo will resemble an adult fish and an adult ape” (Macrone 146).

7 This return to origins is also something Marguerite’s daughter Tina will do after her mother’s death. However, Tina travels to Umbertina’s village in southern Italy while Marguerite travels Umbertina’s path to the United States.

8 As Cavarero states, narration “reveals the meaning without committing the error of defining it” (3).

9 Barolini thinly disguises Mario Puzo in this description of meeting with Piero Paco. “The Helen Barolini Papers, 1947-1983, at Radcliffe College” includes a listing of Barolini’s correspondence with Mario Puzo.

10 Even though Marguerite dies, her story continues on in the notebooks that she leaves which complicate her identity for the daughters who just see her as a wife and mother; as Rachel DuPlessis suggests: “Writing beyond the ending means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative.” As a narrative device, Marguerite’s notebooks change the story and produce “a narrative that denies or reconstructs seductive patterns of feeling that are culturally mandated, internally policed, [and] hegemonically poised” (DuPlessis 5).

11 Subsequent references will be abbreviated to The American Woman.

12 In her book of essays, Break Every Rule, Maso includes several sections where she discusses the aesthetic importance of notebooks including: “Woolf implies that the writer may have to write notebooks rather than masterpieces” (36).

13 See my chapter four for much more on Maso’s Ghost Dance.

14 At one point Catherine tells Lucien that her name is Catherine Stephanie Christine, but does not necessarily indicate that Christine is her last name (74).

15 See Mary Frances Pipino’s discussion of the stages of immigrant assimilation which draws on the work of Thomas Ferraro, Rose Basile Green and Carol Bonomo Ahern as it relates to Dorothy Bryant’s Ella Price’s Journal, another novel that integrates the journal-in-the-text throughout the whole book and has much in common with both the form and feminism
of *Umbertina* and *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat*. The character of Ella Price departs a marriage and moves residences, but does not travel abroad as Marguerite and Catherine do. Pipino writes of Ella Price’s *Journal*: “I would argue that Bryant chose to use the form of the consciousness-raising novel... to foreground her concerns regarding gender identity, but also because she recognized the parallels between American women and the immigrant in their respective struggles for identity and for social political, and economic power. The fear of transformation, and the loss of the old ways of thinking and living, is an important element of both feminist and ethnic fiction” (71).

16 Maso wrote the novel during the two years she was “living off her NEA fellowship at the Karolyi Foundation, and international artists colony in southern France” (Hackett 71).

17 Josephine Gattuso Hendin has called Puzo’s *The Dark Arena* “an unusual take on the double consciousness of an Italian American in a reverse migration” which similarly applies to *The American Woman*. Hendin explains: “Mosca has lost feeling, family, and friends: ‘he felt no sorrow, no desolation that there was no one, no human being to speed him on his way, only the wind which swept across the ruined continent’ (283). His reverse migration is conceived of in terms of an immersion in the entire European experience of destruction, loss, and the death of the family. There is no mention of rebuilding or any spirit of survival, because, as in Rossellini’s film, the human spirit has itself been destroyed. The unraveling of his hope for any family underscores Puzo’s use of the violation of Italian-American ideals to convey the totality of his collapse” (40). Like Mosca, Catherine has lost family, love, and home. Her sexual encounters attempt to fill the loss of emotion, but end up emphasizing her ruin. Catherine’s relationship with Sylvia Byrd brings the presence of war into the novel repeatedly through the stories and memories Sylvia has of surviving that difficult period. While Catherine does not reference *Germany Year Zero*, she and Lucien do talk about Italian neo-realist film of which Rossellini is a major figure.

18 For discussions of the language in Catherine’s notebook, see DeShell, Cooley, and Stirling.

19 For more on “calling statements” such as “Once upon a time” that start fairytales and folktales see my Chapter 6.

20 Roberson theorizes, “Rather than assuredly finding herself at the center, the journeying woman often finds herself in the margins, the borderlands between cartographic, political, poetic, and psychic lives that likewise become destabilized, porous, redrawn with her relocations” (9).


22 The mid-1980s represent the height of Michael Jackson’s mainstream popularity. His album *Thriller* was released in 1982 and stayed on the charts for several years selling millions...
of copies world-wide. He went on a global concert tour which set attendance records in many countries. The controversy and struggle of his later years, before his death in the summer of 2009, adds an interesting parallel to Catherine’s erratic behavior.
III. HISTORICAL WITNESSES: REMEMBERING THE COMMUNITY
in Tina De Rosa’s Paper Fish and Octavia Waldo’s A Cup of the Sun

If texts like Umbertina and The American Woman in the Chinese Hat examine the individual storyteller without community and always on the move, then other Italian American texts provide a striking contrast by representing communities rooted in place with their individuals bound by region. Tina De Rosa’s Paper Fish (1980) and Octavia Waldo’s A Cup of the Sun (1961) present characters that absorb the stories told to them and about them, which results in the creation of permanent connections to their fictional communities.

In a 1980 article entitled “An Italian-American Woman Speaks Out,” Tina De Rosa writes:

Sometimes, in the summer, I walk down Taylor Street—what’s left of it—and buy lupini or pistachio nuts or lemonade and sit on the steps of someone’s house, the way I did when I was a child. I watch the street, and see people who look vaguely familiar. I might have known them years ago, but there is no way to tell for sure. I see young girls who are dressed exactly the way I dressed twenty years ago when I was a teenager. Not one inch of it has changed. And I feel like a ghost sitting there.
After I did that often enough, I began to say to myself: I could write a book about this. And then I did. (39)

The book De Rosa wrote is *Paper Fish* which portrays the crumbling ethnic enclave of Chicago’s west side and belongs to the rich tradition of ethnic neighborhood spaces Italian American writers have captured in novels. Mario Puzo’s *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1964), Pietro Di Donato’s *Christ In Concrete* (1939), and Julia Savarese’s *The Weak and the Strong* (1952), all depict Depression area communities in New York City, and along with similar tenement novels like Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep* (1934), Anzia Yezierska’s *The Bread Givers* (1925) or Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), have come to direct the discussion of what Tom Ferraro has called “up-from-the- immigrant-colony” narratives (16). These ethnic writers from the first half of the 20th century mythologize assimilation to American society and construct what Georgina Dodge has termed “a master narrative of immigration,” which still dominates the discussion (158). Outside of fiction, the immigrant struggle is always a much more diverse experience, but the east coast, urban, tenement stories of Europeans who arrive at Ellis Island and assimilate to American culture continue to be the standard against which immigrant narratives are compared even though in the twenty-first century the borders, groups, and issues for immigrants are significantly different.¹

To complicate the immigrant experience in fiction, at least for Italian Americans, the New York City tenement narratives are complemented by other Italian American regional novels: Guido D’Agostino’s *Olives on the Apple Tree* (1940) portrays a rural village just north of New York City, John Fante’s *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938) captures a Colorado mining town, and Jo Pagano’s *The Golden Wedding* (1943) depicts a Los Angeles immigrant colony. In addition, two historical novels represent World War II era regional communities; Waldo’s *A
*Cup of the Sun* takes place in a small enclave on the outskirts of Philadelphia and De Rosa’s *Paper Fish* renders a west side Chicago neighborhood. Both novels emphasize specific sub-regional spaces within the larger city, and the depictions of regional communities by these writers expand and complicate the immigrant novel genre focused on New York City.

It is not a new enterprise to think of ethnic literature in terms of regionalism. In the 1960s and 1970s both Leslie Fiedler and Irving Howe characterized ethnic literature as a type of regional literature. Fiedler wrote that ethnic literature “is like all sub-literature which we customarily call ‘regional,’ [that is] writing intended to represent the values and interests of a group which feels itself penalized, even threatened, by the disregard of the larger community” (74 qtd in Ferraro 2). 2 “Threatened,” “penalized” and “disregarded” are examples of the types of issues that previously have linked ethnic and regional literature. Despite the threat of being doubly dismissed from discussions of national literature because of these two labels, the novels found at this intersection of ethnicity and the regional neighborhood are important for how they engage the dominant American narrative.

Geographically, ethnic communities often exist in opposition to the larger city or state. Instead of thinking of a region as a geographical category, however, Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse have re-conceptualized the determining characteristics of region based on the etymology of the Latin “*regere*” — meaning “realm, rex, [or] king”—that is, region as “an area ruled by a more powerful entity—[in] earlier [times] a king, in modern times the state or nation.” Thus in Fetterley and Pryse’s paradigm, the “very words ‘region’ and ‘regionalism’ convey political relations of subordination” (5). Ethnic communities exist as spaces in between the country of origin and the host country and as such are doubly positioned as other to both nations. When a neighborhood ideology develops, it is often the way for a community to resist
the control and values of the larger dominant American culture. In fact, Frank Davey has written that in general, “[t]he region appears to have mainly the nation-state as other” (3); while Philip Fisher claims “Regionalism and individualism in its strongest form constitute the primary antagonists within American culture” (Still 153). For ethnic regional spaces the contrast is set in opposition to the national culture, but prejudice also plays a part in constituting the boundaries of the region. Michel Laguerre reminds readers that ethnic “minoritized spaces” are indeed “expressions of the willingness of immigrants to maintain their social traditions” and “ongoing relations with the country of origin” but, he reiterates, “a second reason they have come into being is that mainstream society has constrained the immigrants to form these enclaves because of prejudice and discrimination” (81). Where the dominant culture may view a minoritized community as unwilling to assimilate, the minoritized community may see itself as protecting its members from the aggressions of the dominant society’s oppression, prejudice, and antagonism. Dodge links this struggle to the formation of American culture itself, and writes that “the story of becoming American is one of negotiating individual and community identities within racist culture” (158). The geographic and ideological boundaries of local regions call into focus the values and practices of dominant American culture by contrast and in opposition.

If fictional Italian enclaves or Little Italy neighborhoods are local regions, then these narratives are characterized by a regional ideological discourse as well. Ruled by an entity or system that supersedes or sidesteps the dominant system, the local system of values, cultural practices or conventions that control the neighborhood are more powerful in that local space than the systems and values that control the wider territories of city, state, or nation. Davey writes: “As a discourse, [a region] represents a general social or political strategy for resisting
meanings generated by others in a nation-state” (4). These theories of regionalism provide a way of thinking about what ethnic texts like Waldo’s *A Cup of the Sun* or De Rosa’s *Paper Fish* do. Neither novel is in any way a nostalgic or touristic representation of a colorful Little Italy region; rather, in both Waldo’s and De Rosa’s novels, each writer constructs the Italian American neighborhood as a “site of contestation” where localized systems of knowledge and culture, what Laguerre calls “minoritized space,” operate dialectically in various opposing and cooperating ways with dominant majority culture. Laguerre has written that "in order to have ethnic minorities one must also have a minoritized space" (4) and location is fundamental to marginalized identity because it "fixes individuals to specific niches where they get their early socialization, where their memories are buried, and from where they read the outside world and interact with it" (97). Just as books like Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* present a localized small town community to critique the urban post-World War I society, ethnic writers also represent their fictional communities to show the myriad ways a local ethnic culture reacts to and resists the positioning values of dominant majority society. The framed structure of novels like *Paper Fish* and *A Cup of the Sun* allows ethnic writers to explore the tensions between the individual and the collective community, the struggles within the region, and between the neighborhood and the majority space beyond. Situated in the localized ethnic space governed by regional values, these novels both interpret and critique ethnic place within the wider American culture.

In the fictional ethnic enclaves represented in *A Cup of the Sun* and *Paper Fish*, the neighborhood discourse re-enforces a regional ideology of memory and witnessing of the collective past through storytelling. This regional ideology, however, clashes with the discourse prominent in national American fiction, which focuses on dreams for the future and starting
over without the baggage of the past. Fisher calls this fictional blank slate “abandoned
difference” and writes that it is achieved through “thousands of negations by which the children
of Italian Americans, German Americans and Chinese Americans erased letter by letter the
accent, style of laughter, customs of family life, dress, and idiom of the old country so as to be
at last simply American” (Still 39). Negation and erasure permeate American narratives, but
almost by definition are rejected in ethnic American narratives where ethnic values and
practices take precedence, or memories of the ethnic experience dominate the present as in the
novels by De Rosa and Waldo.

Just as De Rosa the writer sat watching the street to remember the past community,
Waldo frames *A Cup of the Sun* with the appearance of “the Old Man,” an emotionally
wounded ex-priest who acts as the community’s conscience and watches over the boundaries of
the neighborhood from his porch. Waldo sacrifices the Old Man by the end of the novel for his
inability to move forward from the past but only after his son Pompeii takes his place as the
symbolic custodian of the community’s memory by vowing to be a priest. Using more formal
structures, *Paper Fish* accomplishes a similar focus on memory through the frame. De Rosa
uses modernist structures—fragmentation, stream-of-consciousness and embedded stories. The
Prelude and Epilogue, which together act as the frame, isolate the memory of a family and a
neighborhood and construct the representation of a collective community consciousness. Both
novels bear witness to the memory of an Italian American neighborhood experience and testify
to an alternative urban space where ethnic values and practices question the discursive
construction of dominant American culture. When ethnic communities are rooted in oral
storytelling practices, the writers like De Rosa and Waldo who develop in those communities
and retain those ethnic practices write novels of memory instead of historical novels. Instead of
“abandoning their differences” in Fisher’s terms, they make the struggles and the value of ethnic community their focus.

A. WITNESSING

The regional ideology of memory and witnessing govern both novels. For Italian American culture, which is famous for keeping the silence of *omertá* and the public presence of *bella figura*, bearing witness and testifying to memory provide an added layer of resonance and tension to the narratives. Fred Gardaphe defines the two Italian social codes: “*omertá* [is] the code of silence that governs what is spoken or not spoken about in public and *bella figura* [is] the code of proper presence or social behavior that governs an individual’s public presence” (*Italian* 20). By writing about events like incest and mental illness both novels transgress the rules by including these topics which the codes would keep from public discussion perhaps even within families. Through their narratives and the regional ideology that they represent, Waldo and De Rosa move beyond mere transgression of silence to actively testifying to the events and their effects on the characters’ individual and collective memories. Writing about American Jewish texts focused similarly, Victoria Aarons has stated, “[C]haracters ..., in telling their personal histories, bear witness to the survival—if only in memory—of a community. And whether the characters tell their own story or those of someone else in the community ... the drama is in the very act of telling stories, stories that bond communities” (5). Both Waldo and De Rosa write characters as witnesses to communities of memory and represent how the act of bearing witness binds them to the community. Instead of starting over or setting out on their own as other fictional characters have done in more nationally focused American novels, characters in *Paper Fish* and *A Cup of the Sun* choose to take their communities with them.
through the stories and memories. They refute the ideology of the blank slate represented in the national literary canon and refuse the erasure required of assimilation. As Aarons has explained about similar narratives, “For these characters, telling stories becomes a vital necessity, at times a final act of despair, but invariably an affirmation of preservation of self possible only within the security of consistently acknowledged communal values, if only as an insistent reminder of them” (5). Characters assert their identity through memories and stories of the community and ground their self-identity in the community identity. In the telling of the stories these characters adhere to the regional values of the community, even as the community falls apart. Also included in both novels are examples of characters that are unable to bear witness to what they have seen and to what has happened to them or to the community, and both novelists represent the toll that silence takes as well.

How the characters tell the stories also reflects their purpose in telling stories. In both Waldo’s and De Rosa’s novels, the stories of the characters and the stories that they tell testify to their community’s trauma within the national discourse. In A Cup of the Sun, the community trauma is depicted primarily as the effects of World War II on the home front, but also epidemic illness, and both events are set in contrast to the various sexual aggressions committed against the community’s young women. In Paper Fish, the trauma that befalls the community is the destruction of the enclave by systemic urban renewal, but again De Rosa juxtaposes that larger narrative with the community’s response to the plight of two young sisters. Both novels utilize multiple perspectives, which continually shift to interpret the narration. De Rosa’s Paper Fish practices a more extreme rhetoric, radically shifting time and point of view almost continuously, but both writers can be seen as using modernist techniques
to represent the chaos and isolation caused in part by the disintegration of the neighborhood regions.

The work on Holocaust narratives by Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer connects disjunctive language to the act of witnessing and provides insight about how each novelist’s language attests to the historical events. Bernard-Donals and Glejzer consider the oral and written testimonies of Holocaust survivors and theorize “the structure of witnessing” as “the structure of a break or an interval between the seen and the (mis)recognized, between the act as it plays itself out in the presence of the witness and the imprint on the witness that can be recalled but not told” that is, “representations of witnessing—testimony—make present a series of breaks, or stutters, in which the act of witnessing itself becomes apparent only at points of trauma” (“Between” 4). As a linguistic style of representing the trauma experienced by the community, the rhetoric of these novels construct a representation of the effect of those traumatic experiences for the reader through breaks, shifts in point of view, and fragmentation. While the Holocaust’s unique tragedy has an undeniable historical specificity, Bernard-Donals and Glejzer’s work on representation of traumatic testimony is useful, especially for thinking about the use of language by writers like De Rosa and Waldo who are working in the realm of memory and community.

B. A CUP OF THE SUN’S FRAME

Written in 1961, Octavia Waldo’s A Cup of the Sun is more conventional than De Rosa’s Paper Fish. The novel follows a linear time progression and each chapter’s title even includes a date. Titled “Summer, 1941,” chapter one begins the summer before World War II and the novel ends as the war does in the last chapter entitled “July, August, 1945.” Waldo uses
the war to drive her representation of a home front Italian American enclave located a train ride away from Philadelphia in a fictional area triangulated in the novel by the train station, the slope of Drexel Street, and Ash Road.

In simplest terms, Waldo’s novel follows a young girl named Niobe Bartoli as she navigates the physical and emotional obstacles in her path presented by her family, neighborhood friends, and the war. Her ultimate goal is to attend a college far from Drexel Street. Situated among characters from three other families, *A Cup of the Sun* contrasts Niobe’s coming-of-age with the ideological disintegration of the Drexel Street neighborhood. However, by continually switching the point of view to spend almost equal time with the other characters, Waldo achieves a group protagonist by tightly weaving Niobe’s experiences with those of her brother Andrea, and two sets of siblings— Pompeii and his sister Laura, and Concetta and her developmentally challenged brother Romeo. All of these young characters act under the watchful eyes of a character called “the Old Man” who frames the novel and represents a community consciousness. The most common type of frame usually introduces a character who then tells the story. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* uses the earnest midwesterner, Nick Carraway, to frame and narrate Jay Gatsby’s rise and fall, or, from his underground room, Ralph Ellison’s unnamed narrator opens and closes *The Invisible Man* to frame his own story with the consequences of where his journey has taken him. In *A Cup of the Sun*, while Waldo does not utilize the Old Man as a storyteller, he acts as the flawed conscience of the neighborhood and a constant reminder of the past.

The book opens and closes with scenes of the Old Man sitting on his porch to watch the street, and Waldo returns to his point of view periodically throughout the book. The Old Man scenes at the beginning and end of the book function as an informal frame that delineates and
enforces the regional ideology in the novel. In the opening scene, Waldo’s description of the Old Man sets up the boundaries of the neighborhood as what he can see from his rocking chair: the train station, the church, the houses of the other characters, the coffee shop, bakery, drugstore and a small grove of trees (3-5). The novel’s perspective crosses outside of these boundaries only a few times. The Old Man also exists in a temporal state that moves between boundaries of time. The clicks of his rocking chair act as a clock marking off the present moments, but his thoughts move between the past and future. Waldo describes the Old Man watching a woman walk from the “trolley barn” to the church, “The sound of her clicking steps moved into the sound of the rocking wicker rocker, and for a moment the woman and the old man were held together in a point counter point made of time to be contested and time to be wasted” (4). The rocking chair reappears occasionally in the novel, as does Waldo’s representing the Old Man’s face and eyes as a kind of “sundial” that charts the passing of time (9). Waldo writes, “The Old Man’s face turned slowly from the sun into the shadow of the man leaning over him. It was a face lined with the cruel penance of time and the despair of atonement” (7). The novel reveals that his wife left him and ever since he has been waiting. He watches for her to disembark from a train and walk down the street to him. The Old Man is set up from the beginning as “watching” and “waiting.” At first, Waldo suggests that he is waiting for his wife to return, but also gives indication that there might be other things he is waiting for as well. The first section that opens the book shifts through multiple characters’ points of view but closes back on the image of the Old Man watching from his rocking chair: “The Old Man silently fed upon these streets. They kept him alive, waiting. Waiting for what and for whom, only he could tell and would not. . . . He was holding out for something. He was determined to hold out” (11). Within this important opening section, Waldo switches point of view at least
seven times alternating between the Old Man, the sculptor Giambelli, the street “huckster,” the group of anonymous boys and the group of anonymous old women. Waldo represents the ideology governing the neighborhood and, as De Rosa will do in her Prelude, achieves a “collective consciousness” in these constant shifts, which continue as she subsequently adds the perspectives of Niobe, Andrea and their parents as well as the other two sets of siblings.

Waldo’s gradual release of information about the Old Man’s past reveals upon rereading that his every moment in the novel is what Walter Benjamin has called “convoluted time,” that is, “the interaction of aging and remembering” (211). When the novel returns to him periodically, he almost always signals the neighborhood’s past. In one example, the sacrifices of war cancel the neighborhood’s celebration of a religious feast day; Waldo describes, “Once, the night of the Assumption had been a feast of wonderful celebration beneath a sky of swishing, swirling fireworks that burst like sunflowers and scattered petals of fire everywhere. Once, bands had played, and dancing had filled Drexel Street and Ash Road” (66). The Old Man counters the quiet with his own music as the wartime searchlights fill the sky. Waldo writes, “Now, the only sound on Drexel Street was a melancholy serenade played on an accordion by a very old man who wore a sprig of rosemary behind his ear and a wrinkled smile on his doleful face” (66). His music reminds the other characters of the past and the loss caused by the war.

Waldo eventually reveals that the Old Man had been a priest during World War I, and at one point was charged with burying the dead. Waldo writes:

Then the first war came, the only war he knew—and as if that in itself were not enough, he awoke one day to find a black sun rising in a semisphere, becoming blacker until its shadow was a dense evil reaching out to touch everything. He
had seen then the hills of death growing one next to the other—man and woman
and child piled high one upon the other all fused together like wet, moldy corn
husks giving forth decayed sweet smells of flesh rotting away... (111).

The description of “women and children” suggest not combat, but the Spanish Flu pandemic
that followed in the immediate aftermath of World War I. Waldo does not make explicit
whether the death of this town is because of the war or the influenza, or whether it takes place
in Italy or in the United States, but in Philadelphia during the 1918 influenza outbreak, priests,
students and prisoners were called on to bury the dead. Waldo’s details suggest the Old Man
is remembering the decay and waste of the deaths by disease—“Students had come to him from
the university” and had worn “white cloth masks, with fingers covered white—all white-sack-
covered from cheeks to ankles” (112). Philadelphia and its surrounding areas were hit
especially hard by the Spanish flu and workers who helped bury the dead wore similar white
clothing (Lynch). Whether in Pennsylvania or overseas, during the war or afterward, in any
case the Old Man is haunted by a death of the community of people “[t]hat once he had
watched ... knowing pride for it” (111). The Old Man’s memory foreshadows the metaphorical
loss of community that World War II causes in the novel. Bernard-Donals and Glejzer claim
that testimonial narratives often show “the effect of the events upon the witness” and that the
testimony “preserves the event in its disruptive effect but the gap between the historical record
and the irretrievable event cannot be filled by memory or testimony” (“Introduction” 7). As a
witness to the trauma, Waldo represents the Old Man’s thoughts as incomplete. The gaps,
missing details, and uncertainties of the Old Man’s story create for the reader the effect of
uncertainty, loss, and sorrow that he feels because of the trauma.
The experience of the burials drive the Old Man from his vocation and into the arms of a prostitute who becomes his wife and then leaves him with two small children—Laura, the daughter who may not be his, and Pompeii, the son he names for another famous lost community “as a tribute to his heritage” (11). As he continues to appear in the novel the Old Man is as powerless a watchdog as the old yellow hound that sleeps at his feet. Under his ever-present eyes, like the first community that he had known and buried, the community between Drexel Street and Ash Road disintegrates if not physically, then ideologically. Waldo also connects the community that the Old Man buried to the loss of his past in Italy. She writes, “They never called him by name, although he had one. Filippo Rossi, that’s what he was called in the old country” (8). The Old Man often slips into memory as he watches the street. Waldo writes, “For all he saw or cared to see, this could have been a town in Italy, not the outskirts of Philadelphia. It could have been Bari or Chieti for the way it smelled” (10). In the Old Man’s memory the experiences of Italy and the United States collapse and Waldo connects the regional experience of Italy to the ethnic enclave of the United States. The Italian American neighborhood is so similar to the Italian neighborhood, the two combine in the Old Man’s mind. Laguerre writes that members of diasporic communities organize their space and build structures as they had done in their countries of origin; “When we speak of the memory of the diaspora,” he claims, “we refer to immigrants’ ability to reconstruct the past and to shape structures that are reminiscent of that past” (83). The loss of these past regions is present in how the Old Man experiences the physical cityscape of the Drexel Street community and its disintegration.

In the final scene that ends the novel and functions as the end frame, Waldo returns to the Old Man who dies in the very last moments of the book echoing the permanent changes that
have driven apart the Drexel Street community. Waldo again represents the Old Man’s consciousness, and indicates that it was not the long lost wife he awaited throughout the book, but the shadowy figure of death itself. Although the war has ended and people are celebrating, the Old Man “cared nothing for the sun or the peace or the ensuing noise” (246). After the struggles of the younger characters, Waldo returns the novel’s focus to the community consciousness represented by the celebrating crowd and the Old Man’s mysterious temporal boundlessness:

The only thing he cared about now was the peopled street and the foot of it where the orange trolley cars paused for their five minute break. He kept watching that street with single-purposed determination, waiting for a sign, waiting for the one thing that was slow in coming. Now he was no longer prepared to wait indefinitely. All waiting was consumed inside him and he was nothing but dried pith with one vein of life in him. (246)

As De Rosa will do metaphorically at the end of her novel, Waldo depicts “waiting” and “shadow” as death approaches and as the Old Man loses his connection to the community. Waldo reveals that the Old Man has struck a bargain for Pompeii’s safe return from the war: “‘My son is home. Alive and home. I have saved him.’” Death answers “yes,” which prompts the Old Man to ask, “‘He will take my place and be priest?’” Death answers, “‘It is what you have bargained for’” (247). Although Waldo gambles by using a melodramatic and perhaps cliched trope in the “sold-my-soul” tradition, ending on this note does function to lift the novel from realism to a mythical realm, as De Rosa’s novel also will do in the end frame. In this twist, the frame structure sends the reader back through the narrative and the literal figure of death can be read backward to encompass the metaphoric deaths of innocence, family and
community. As the bordering narrative around the other characters’ activities and plot events, the Old Man’s presence as a character who literally overlooks the neighborhood from his porch, keeps the focus on the regional ideology and the shadow memories of the ex-priest’s previous loss of both wife and community. As Mary Ann Caws has noted, “With the framed section set apart as conveying messages or signifying meaningful actions, the frame has to be read as part of the picture” (19). Within this frame, we read the stories of the three sets of siblings through the community consciousness and the Old Man’s loss. In the Old Man’s passive retreat into the past memories under the guise of always waiting for the train to arrive, Waldo signals much more than a literal trolley. The train, as a modernist symbol of technology and the transport out of the community, is Waldo’s symbol of the ending of the closed village of the Drexel Street community. As the closing frame, the impending end was always present in the Old Man’s watching and waiting and his consciousness sets up a contrast to the immediacy of what happens to Niobe and Andrea, Pompeii and Laura, and Concetta and Romeo, the three sets of siblings who dominate the rest of the narrative.

C. ORAL STORYTELLING IN A CUP OF THE SUN

As the Old Man fades in and out of Waldo’s novel, the main drama revolves around Niobe Bartoli, her friends and family. As the frame character, the Old Man keeps the focus on the community ideology that is enforced in the novel by two anonymous groups of community members. The women who gossip and the boys who roam the street define the expected roles and values for Niobe and her circle of friends. In A Cup of the Sun, Niobe is intelligent, studious, and on the cusp of adulthood. She has an overbearing artist for a father, a troubled brother, and a mother who looks away from it all. Within the community, Niobe is the one to
watch, and both Bartoli children are seen as destined for great things. Waldo even sets up the Bartoli exceptionalism spatially. Again in the opening frame section, as the Old Man surveys the rows of hedges, the Bartoli house sticks out: “Only one house on the street had no lawn before it. It squatted low and square upon the sidewalk with a heavy iron grating supporting a glass facade. That was Bartoli’s shop” (10). Marked by the artistry of decorative angels and the iron work, Waldo signals that the Bartolis’ exceptionalism may be as fragile as the glass facade that marks their house and indeed the novel reveals that Niobe and Andrea Bartoli are not exempt from the community’s influence. As the region’s values are policed by the talk of the women, Waldo again links the effectiveness of the gossip to the neighborhood space:

Yet everywhere else sameness was stucco and wood in square blocks—like fortresses perched against the slant of the hill, rising with the hill to the top where the church was and beyond that to the cemetery. Only paved alleyways tunneled through the walls of those fortresses into the mysterious core of intimacy behind the houses where backyards owned no fences, where one man’s property blended with the next to form courtyards in which no one knew privacy. Love and hatred and fear were one here, shaded only by fig trees and grape vines. And the forked tongues of gossip licked its [sic] sinister way from back porch to back porch. (11)

In A Cup of the Sun, Waldo represents Italian style oral storytelling in perhaps its most destructive form, and the gossip keeps the stories about the Old Man’s past circulating and ever present for the younger generation that must deal with the consequences.

The neighborhood women and boys move through the novel as units. Waldo does not single out an individual woman or boy to define outside of each group. Although they have
different motivations, both groups keep the scandal of the Old Man’s past continuously present. The gossip of both groups practices a distinctly southern Italian attitude of honor and shame, and reconstructs an old world ideology in the region where a family’s honor rests fundamentally on the reputations of the wives and daughters. Sicilian historians Jane and Peter Schneider write of southern Italian culture, “Honor asserts the primacy of the nuclear family in society and establishes women as symbols of familial worth” (2). Defined in relation to the man, a wife and daughter are the two most dangerous threats to a family’s honor, and because of the stories about the Old Man’s wife, Laura and Pompeii are victims of their mother’s dishonorable status in the neighborhood. The memory of the neighborhood women reaches back to the gossip in Italy where Laura’s mother was a stage actress from Torino and continues to pass forward the resentful tensions between the northern Italians and those from southern areas. Waldo describes the women’s attitude toward the Old Man’s wife:

“Henh!” Calloused fingers, caressed only by the smoothness of polished rosaries, had swayed excitedly beneath puckered chins where tiny black hairs sprouted, never to be tweezed away. Mauve-colored mouths that had never known anything sweeter than the taste of new wine and the passion of man’s tongue had not smiled, but had condemned again and again. “Puttana!” (9)

The boys are just as infatuated with the gossip about Laura’s mother but instead of condemning or shunning her as the women do, they desire her more. Waldo writes:

Their thoughts fed on the unspoken truth of her birth, on the tantalizing memory of a blond woman. They had never known, had only heard about in whispered secrets. The woman who had mothered Laura and left her and would never return to her. The Old Man’s woman. The whore. (19)
The effect on Laura is profound. The boys use the story to authorize their sexual fantasies about Laura and the women essentially mark her as permanently burdened with her mother’s sins. The combined effect creates a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy for Laura who eventually finds herself pregnant by a boyfriend whose family forbids marriage between the two because of the scandal of Laura’s parents. In a conversation, Laura tells Niobe how the neighborhood women have treated her since childhood:

“They put compassionate fingers on my head and said, ‘Poor child of God—ah! pity! A victim of circumstance, but she doesn’t look like Her!’ Her was my mother! My mother,” she repeated softly. “I didn’t know that then; they never let me know. They followed me with their rosaries and crossed themselves when I passed, as if I were the evil eye walking in the street. ...” (173)

Laura cannot move beyond her parents’ past when the neighborhood ideology holds strongly to memory and bears witness to how Laura’s mother treated the Old Man. The transplanted Southern Italian code of honor dictates that the past of Laura’s family defines who Laura is. Laura continues, “Our names mattered—our fathers mattered— and who is my father? Every night I ask myself that. The Old Man or a stranger? There’s no one who can tell me. But it matters. Even the color of our hair and our eyes matters. People don’t have to look long to know who I am. I am Her daughter! The whore’s kid!” (173). Fisher’s “abandoned difference” is an impossible option for Laura, and if she stays in the neighborhood she feels she will never escape her parents’ history. While Pompeii and Andrea can leave the neighborhood because of the war and Niobe can travel to college, Waldo gives Laura no option except marriage. Stuck between the gossip of the neighborhood and fear of more gossip, Laura has no one to turn to for
help when her college boyfriend refuses to marry her. Shunning Niobe and Concetta, she dies from a self-administered poisoning in a desperate attempt at an abortion.

After Laura dies, Niobe is left to bear witness to the effect of the neighborhood women’s gossip. Waldo writes: “Women gathered here and there in circles beneath cupolas of cotton umbrellas, dangled their rosaries to their sides, and whispered, ‘Una disgrazia.’ Some mounted the porch stairs slowly, swaying their weight from side to side, and disappeared within the square of dark doorway behind the crepe” (179). Even after Laura’s death, the women publicly express their disapproval as an assertion of the regional ideology—they condemingly whisper “a disgrace” in Italian. They bear witness to the sin as Niobe bears witness to their role in forcing Laura’s desperately tragic behavior. As witness, however, Niobe is also victim of the neighborhood’s ideology. In part goaded by the neighborhood boys about his lack of sexual experiences, Niobe’s brother Andrea has sexually raped her. Her fear of her father, and his faith in the family’s reputation as exceptional, keeps her silent, and she does not expose Andrea’s actions. Thinking about what would happen if her father found out about the rape, she can only conjure his Southern Italian reaction as anger over the Bartoli family reputation; in an image that echoes a later argument about Mussolini’s death, she imagines her father saying, “‘You disgrace the Bartoli name and I’ll crush your chops. I’ll drag your bleeding body through these filthy streets and hang you by your feet for all to see’” (63).

When Laura dies of the botched abortion, Waldo writes Niobe’s reaction as though it is Niobe who has been traumatized. In Bernard-Donals and Glejzer’s terms, Niobe is put in the position of both witness and witnessed, through her connection with Laura (15). The dissonance of Waldo’s language suggests the trauma. As she watches the group of women under the umbrellas in the quote above, Waldo describes Niobe’s reaction as uncertain and
disjunctive: “Niobe walked past them. ‘Laura is dead,’ she whispered; her brain picked up the words and reiterated them again and again trying to grasp meaning from them, but failing to understand anything except the emptiness of the sound and the cold and the rain” (179). The language that Waldo uses here echoes the language that she uses when Niobe remembers the rape in her first failed attempt to bear witness in a confession to the priest. In that scene, Waldo writes, “She knew her soul was dead. It had died in the early summer. She remembered that she had not cried. She had felt herself divide: what was inside her thinking was one person; her body was someone else” (70). Both descriptions emphasize characteristics that indicate she is traumatized as a witness to Laura’s tragedy similarly to her own violation. The breakage described by Bernard-Donals and Glejzer is reflected in the choppiness of her thoughts and the elisions between her thinking and feeling. Bearing witness or giving testimony can reinscribe the trauma.

The oral storytelling and gossip of the community has enforced the regional ideology of honor and shame and damaged both young women. After Laura’s death, Niobe determines that what Laura and Andrea have been telling her throughout the novel is true: “Change would not come to this neighborhood. Life and death would crawl over it, but it would remain untouched” (180). She begins to believe in this community’s permanence, although she acknowledges to Pompeii that the war has changed the neighborhood. He asks her, “‘Where did the war go?’” and Niobe answers, “‘It’s here, don’t kid yourself.’” Pompeii then reveals a desire similar to Niobe’s about the unchanging nature of the ethnic region. Like Niobe, Pompeii’s attitude toward the neighborhood is a kind of rejection of its regional power and influence. He denies the effect of the war on the Drexel Street area saying it has changed “Not in the least,” then expresses a desire for timelessness and stasis that displays contempt, “Everything’s the same
here. Same old fig tree. Same old summer. Same old smell of garlic frying in olive oil. Nothing changes here. Nothing really. Ten, twenty years from now you can walk through this court and see nothing new. People get born here, they marry, and die; but that is all” (226). The contempt that rolls behind these words signals the change that Niobe and Pompeii have realized in themselves. The war has changed both of them and because of that change, they can reject a community that believes it will never change. This tension authorizes the two characters’ decision to leave — Niobe to a Western college, and Pompeii into the priesthood. Yet they both acknowledge the changes in the neighborhood: the wartime search lights, the absence of young men who entered military service, the cancelled festivals, the psychological damage done to shell shocked men like Andrea, and the other uncategorized ideological consequences like Laura’s death or Concetta’s marriage to a much older man.

Niobe and Pompeii cling to the claim that the neighborhood will not change so that they, having changed, must then leave, but they also have internalized the regional ideology. In saying goodbye to her neighbor, the artist Giambelli, Niobe comes to a further realization; even though she chooses to believe that the neighborhood will not change, she imagines taking the essence of the community with her wherever she goes. Waldo writes:

But there are some places you never leave behind, and they both knew it. This dancing crowd: Ralph Trozzi drinking wine with Pompeii, Concetta dancing in her husband’s arms, the idiot child bouncing his head against his mother’s window—the smell of wine, the fig trees, the broken bell in the church tower—even the girl’s detachment. This Niobe would never leave behind. She could travel the world over and around and never see this place again, but it would be as present as her heart beating in her chest. Every face she would meet would
evoke a face she had known here. Every voice would ring familiarity in her ear. Woman’s touch would risk comparison with the dead touch of Laura. Man’s embrace would call up Andrea to her. This was more than a place. This was a way of life—the index she would carry with her. She would see and know the future through it; she would grow because of it. But she could never deny or renounce its existence. It had burned its mark into her soul, and it would take her a lifetime to discover how deep the scars went. (243)

Maintaining a strong relationship to the regional ethnic identity—signaled by the *campanilismo* of the church bell now “broken,” the customary wine and dance, and the fig trees in the landscape—becomes part of Niobe’s individual identity. For Waldo’s characters, leaving the regional enclave does not provide a starting over as it might for characters in other American novels. There is no blank slate possible in their future because Niobe and Pompeii bring the stories with them and will continually bear witness to Laura’s death, Andrea’s violation, and the Old Man’s sorrow. In novels like *A Cup of the Sun*, as Aarons explains, bearing witness is “far from a static recovery of past stories.” She claims “It is rather an active dialectic between what is given and what is possible in an individual life, what is ‘history’ and what is made in the ongoing narrative of individual lives.” Niobe’s conflation of the war, the stories of Laura and Andrea, the place and her own experiences past and future demonstrate Aaron’s claim that “The individual cannot be separated ultimately from the historical or cultural context that, however unconsciously, informs his or her preoccupations” (9). In Fisher’s terms, neither Niobe nor Pompeii will ever be able to “abandon the differences” that their Drexel Street neighborhood has planted in their consciousness. The sensory markers of
people, odors, landscapes and sounds will continually call up testimony of the tragic events for Niobe, and the Old Man for Pompeii.

D. PAPER FISH’S FRAME

Tina De Rosa’s Paper Fish, like Waldo’s A Cup of the Sun, uses the shifting multiple points of view and is framed with a Prologue and Epilogue. However, De Rosa intensifies the confusion and uncertainty by breaking the narrative more extensively to reflect a kind of modernist experimentation in the tradition of other women writers who have broken the sequence of narrative. In bringing together essays about women writers who “explode dominant forms,” Friedman and Fuchs provide an important context for reading De Rosa’s work:

By attending to atmosphere, mood, texture, color, rhythm, intonation, and musicality other contemporary experimentalists like Toni Morrison, Joyce Carol Oates (in various works), Marilynne Robinson, and Eva Figes direct their texts toward lyricism and poetic language. They penetrate the world of solid objects and render them magical. Boundaries give way, surfaces become porous and the world is charged with an otherness (32).

As with these other writers’ work, the lyricism and sensory poetry of De Rosa’s prose style achieves a similar “magical” quality that reflects a collapse of boundaries in chaotic shards. By the time De Rosa writes Paper Fish in the late 1970s, “high modernism” is fully institutionalized as a standard in the American literary canon, and critics have already started positioning “post-modernist” texts as the next canonical literary movement. Several critics have compared Paper Fish to the modernism of Roth’s Call It Sleep, in part because of the writing
style, but more so because of the tale of immigration told through the consciousness of the young child. While *Paper Fish* does speak to Roth’s novel from the 1930s, De Rosa’s use of storytelling and chaotic narrative has perhaps more common with novels such as Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977) and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* (1982) written in De Rosa’s own time period. Like the other women experimentalists, De Rosa utilizes non-linearity, amplification, and discontinuity, to “subvert closure, logic and fixed authoritarian points of view” and show the power of storytelling within a fractured and experimental structure (Friedman and Fuchs 7). At the height of the ethnic revival movement, De Rosa’s revisits the story of a multi-generational Italian immigrant family but aesthetically disrupts the naturalistic realism of the earlier Italian American immigrant novels to challenge the authoritative narrative of those previous assimilation plots. As Mary Jo Bona has stated about *Paper Fish*, “If the themes are traditional, De Rosa’s storytelling transforms them into an innovative text which affirms that the topic of Italian ethnicity is equally conducive to modern literary strategies as other ethnic texts have been” (“Broken” 96).

The chronology of *Paper Fish*, similar to Waldo’s *A Cup of the Sun*, extends to the years of World War II, although De Rosa’s novel never mentions the war. She uses dates in several of the section titles as Waldo does, but De Rosa’s narrative is out of sequence. Part II is titled “Summer 1949, Late July” followed by Part IV, called “Summer 1949, Early June” and Part V which returns the narrative to “Summer 1949, Late July.” De Rosa uses the dates to establish the present time of the novel, which follows eight-year-old Carmolina BellaCasa as she runs away from home because of her family’s plans to institutionalize her older sister who suffers from an unidentified mental illness. Chronicling events before and after the summer of 1949, the narrative slips back to before the eight-year-old’s parents meet, presumably in the late
1930s just before the war, and forward to the Summer of 1958 and then 1963 when the fictional neighborhood is demolished to build the state university.\textsuperscript{13} The stories that the characters recount travel further back in time to the 1920’s in Chicago and even earlier to life in turn-of-the-century Italy. De Rosa structures the novel in eight parts including a Prelude and Epilogue that together act as a frame. Similar to Waldo’s use of the Old Man as frame, De Rosa’s Prelude and Epilogue establish not a storytelling character per say, but a collective community consciousness that exists without temporal or spatial boundaries. The opening and closing sections of \textit{Paper Fish} work together to suggest the collective memory.

Where Waldo establishes the external space of the neighborhood region immediately in the opening frame focused on the Old Man and what he can see from his porch, De Rosa immerses the reader in the indeterminate internal space of the BellaCasa discursive memory. The opening lines declare the uncertainty and disorientation from where De Rosa’s readers embark: “Our images and our memories/ face each other,/ bewildered,/ in a mirror./ Who is to solve the mystery?” (1). The contracted nature of the phrases imprint shadows and impressions while giving the reader the task of constructing meaning to “solve the mystery.” In an earlier typescript of the novel,\textsuperscript{14} however, De Rosa is much more direct in what task lies before the reading of \textit{Paper Fish} and this task has everything to do with bearing witness and testifying to experience and personal history.

In the typescript she writes:

\begin{quote}
I believe it is possible, through imagination, to remember a moment in the past exactly as it was lived by someone else.

A fine line, a glass filament runs between imagination
\end{quote}
and memory.

Our images and our memories
face each other,
bewildered,
in a mirror.
Who is to solve the mystery?

They become a third thing.

The enigma casts its white shadow.

A person’s history
becomes his own myth. (TS JMP 5)

In the typescript, a box is drawn around the stanza that begins “Our images and our memories.” De Rosa writes “only this” in the margin and draws a line through the rest. In the lines that she cuts from the final published text, De Rosa links imagination and memory more fragiley to create an elusive “third thing” that is “enigma[tic]” and casts its “white shadow.” The inverted image of the “white shadow” echoes the reflective surfaces of the “mirror” and “glass filament” and call up subsequent imagery of the sister Doriana as a lighted shadow. The emphasis in the beginning stanza on remembering another person’s experience “exactly” asserts the promise of bearing witness and testifying to another’s story. The last line declares the ideological work of the novel, to mythologize personal history and by extension to mythologize community history.

In the typescript this page precedes the table of contents and therefore can be read as more of an authorial mission statement or address to the reader and separate from the novel’s characters, although the distinction between the characters’ points of view and the authorial narrator is undermined and ever-shifting throughout the novel.

De Rosa gives the reader the task to “solve the mystery” in this Prelude and begins immediately to create uncertainty through depicting specific images of the mother, father and sister disrupted by lyrical memories and questions. The interval juxtapositions of image and
thought pull the reader along searching for narrative convention. A yet-to-be-born Carmolina narrates the Prelude in a stream-of-consciousness that knows the past, present and future of the BellaCasa family. De Rosa writes,

My mother’s skin brushes strawberries, her skin will brush my father’s, that night their skin will make me, but I know none of this. I am less than the strawberries, I am less than the carving my father is making with his hands, less than the brown intent of his eyes over wood, less. I exist with the god of decisions, and he is deciding me. I do not see any of this, do not know any of this, because I am less than a fraction, the smallest fraction of time, of moment, of memory. (2)

By the end of the Prelude, many of the book’s most tragic moments have been cryptically revealed, but more importantly, De Rosa establishes the lyricism of the style and the ideology of memory/testimony that dominate the novel. Even before Carmolina is born, she has memories of the BellaCasa family and in fact she has memories of things that will not happen until twenty years in the future. The opening Prelude also speaks for those who cannot speak for themselves, the “someone else” of the typescripts cut lines. The silenced one of the family and community—the sister. De Rosa writes:

My sister has already been born. She was born the first child. Over and over the family says: She was broken early in life, a toy that was too beautiful. She frightened my mother, who did not know what to make of her and my father, my father was appalled. No child could be that beautiful. Early in her life something happened, something that went without explanation, and she was broken. It is all leaves, leaves falling out of a tree, with no hands to catch them. No one asked
questions. Everyone acted as though none of it were happening. No one recognized her, no one saw beyond the black eyes. No one looked. My sister was a swan, a black swan that flew into the incorrect night, followed the wrong moon, and my family was left with glass eyes. (2)

If the first step of being a witness is to watch as Waldo’s Old Man does, De Rosa suggests here in this opening frame that no one was watching, especially in reference to the sister, “[n]o one asked questions,” and no one acknowledged that “it” happened. The repetition of the language De Rosa uses implies a bubbling up of the unconscious or the building up of and release of emotion. Bernard-Donals and Glejzer have written that “living memory is not history” and “living memory is not so much the recuperation of events as it is an imprint of the loss of the event, and narrative histories, built as a bulwark against memory’s loss, stand in and replace the event” (5). The Prelude reads as a type of fictional “living memory,” as De Rosa’s text bears witness for the sister by acknowledgement, questioning, explanation and, ultimately, remembrance. Imaginative fiction constructs the “imprint of the loss” through De Rosa’s emotionally charged lyricism.

If the Prelude of Paper Fish is “a meditation on the formation and dissolution of a family” as Fred Gardaphe claims, the Epilogue focuses on the neighborhood region. (Italian 133). In an interview she gave in 1997, De Rosa compared herself twice to survivors of the Holocaust. She said:

When I was nineteen, my father and grandmother died, and my childhood neighborhood was destroyed. Except for my sister, I was left literally alone. I felt haunted by the images of my childhood. There was no one I could talk to about what I had experienced. It was like a Holocaust experience. For my own
sanity, I had to tell the story. So I wrote to make these people present. (Meyer 59-60)

Her stated purpose here was to bear witness not only to the family members but the childhood neighborhood. Later as she ends the interview, she explains her identification with Anne Frank:

Being singled out. Experiencing terrible trauma. Experiencing devastating loss. Experiencing being a child and not understanding what’s going on around me.

When the city came and started knocking down the buildings of my old neighborhood, my father was very resistant. We were the last family to leave the block. As the buildings were being torn down, the city would mark a yellow X with paint on the next building to go and that’s what I said to myself, “I feel like I’m in Nazi Germany.” It was unspeakable sorrow. (83)

De Rosa’s Epilogue contemplates the destruction of the community by refracting the disintegration of the neighborhood through divergent elements and characters. In the Epilogue’s six surreal and impressionistic fragments, De Rosa alternates between descriptions of the physical destruction of the neighborhood and the activities of a character named Giovanni, a neighbor of the BellaCasa family, who refuses to leave his house even as the wrecking ball approaches. A substitute for Carmolina, he wanders through the neighborhood as she does earlier in the novel and interacts with the by-then familiar characters who take their leave of the community: the seedman, the butcher’s wife, the neighbors packing up their trucks, the children playing amid the broken fire hydrants and the women from the church. Giovanni continually unpacks what his wife has packed and with nowhere left to go maintains to
everyone he meets his belief that “The city, she change her mind then you be sorry” (118). De Rosa writes Giovanni as witness to the demolition:

Giovanni went to sit alone on the concrete stoop of his house. Berrywood Street had disappeared as though it were a picture someone had wiped away. The city said the Italian ghetto should go, and before the people could drop their forks next to their plates and say, pardon me?, the streets were cleared (120).

Echoing the lack of oversight, the questions, and the actions about the sister that De Rosa describes in the Prelude, the Epilogue connects to the opening Prelude and extends the witnessing ideology to the neighborhood. The family could do nothing to help the sister, and the “people” can do nothing to help “the Italian ghetto.”

Again, the emotional quality of De Rosa’s writing records the “imprint of the loss” as a witness. As Bernard-Donals and Glejzer claim, some witnesses concern themselves more with effect than the facts and statistics (“Introduction” 5). De Rosa personifies the buildings and bricks as they are dismantled to express the reaction of the stunned people. In one section De Rosa writes:

Underneath, the street is brick, brick that is no longer whole, and red but chipped and gray like the faces of dead people trapped under lava. The street heaves up bricks, the guts of the street spit up brick. The face of the street cracks open and reveals its belly of brick, the gray faces. Squads of men in white t-shirts and hard hats with pickaxes in their hands chew into the street’s cement face and the face cracks and there is no body under the bricks, only the cracked cement face. (117)
The sharp phrases capture violence in their anger and desperation in tone. As the material layers are peeled away and vomited out, the neighborhood ideology of memory is stripped as well. Instead of holding memories, the buildings themselves become the story that fills the moment. Gardaphe notes that the folkloric elements in these sections represent the oral tradition of storytelling permeating the novel (Italian 138). Continuing to echo the qualities of the folk tale, in another section, De Rosa writes:

The houses of the families with their tongues of rugs sticking out were smashed down, the houses filled with soup pots and quick anger, filled with forks and knives and recipes written in the heads of the women were struck in their sides with the ball of the wrecking crane and the knives and bedclothes and plaster spilled out. . . . (117)

De Rosa implies that the stories about “soup pots and quick anger” and the “recipes written in the head of the women” are gone and leave only the inanimate household objects “on the ground” and lifeless. The neighborhood that Giovanni surveys from his porch has yet to be demolished but is already abandoned; De Rosa describes:

Next of Giovanni’s house, where the little wooden home of Mrs. Consuelo had been, a dark wooden fence made a perfect square around nothing. The sunflowers still grew in Doria’s garden, behind the house that wasn’t there. Across the street, all the buildings were gone so that Giovanni could sit on his stoop and look into Quincy Street a block away. Augie’s grocery store was an empty frame, like a stage prop someone forgot to move. The butcher shop stood empty of its chickens. Mrs. Schiavone’s butcher block shone under the sun in the alley, the blood congealed on the wood like skin. (117)
Giovanni’s role as witness mirrors Carmolina’s role and De Rosa writes both characters as receptacles of memory. Taken together, De Rosa’s Prelude and Epilogue connect the tragic events suffered by the BellaCasa to the destruction of the neighborhood. The frame turns the story back on to itself, linking family and neighborhood, and the end will send the reader back to the opening frame.

In the novel’s structure, Carmolina’s memory is linked to Giovanni’s witnessing. While most of the Epilogue takes place in the specific time and place of the neighborhood’s demolition, in the very last segment De Rosa returns to Carmolina’s point of view as Waldo returns to the Old Man at the end of *A Cup of the Sun*. In a short scene, Carmolina and Grandma sit watching a circus clown sweep up a spot of light as it disappears. Since the section that proceeds the Epilogue suggests that the grandmother will soon succumb to illness and die, the out-of-context scene suggests the novel has returned to the space of memory and imagination of the Prelude to construct De Rosa’s “the third thing”—myth. In this ending, De Rosa echoes an earlier scene where Grandma Doria tells Carmolina about the circus. As they watch the sad clown,¹⁸ Carmolina comforts the grandmother’s fears that the light will disappear completely.

The light she go away, Grandma says.

Nothing goes away, Carmolina says. (121)

In this very small exchange, the community’s ideology of memory is restored in Carmolina as witness to both the grandmother’s stories and the life of the neighborhood. As Niobe and Pompeii carry the mythic experience of the Drexel Street community in *A Cup of the Sun*, Carmolina carries the Berrywood Street neighborhood in *Paper Fish*. In Carmolina’s reassurance to the grandmother, De Rosa suggests that the memories of the family and the
community will continue. Gardaphe links this moment to Carmolina’s ethnic identity and writes, “Little Italy and the human forces that once gave it life may be physically transformed, but psychologically they remain forever, mentally preserved in the identity of Carmolina as she has fashioned it out of the stories of Grandma Doria” (*Italian* 139). While this is true, the Prelude and Epilogue acting as the frame suggest that the neighborhood and witnessing the loss of the neighborhood have as big an impact of Carmolina’s relationship to ethnicity. In De Rosa’s interview the two are inseparable; she said, “*Paper Fish* is a book of place. It’s the poetry of geography. I had grown up in a sacred space with very special people who suffered” (Meyer 60). De Rosa’s use of Giovanni as witness to the neighborhood’s disintegration, and his position within the frame, focuses attention on how Carmolina has witnessed the ethnic neighborhood throughout the novel. In her experience of the neighborhood, Carmolina like Niobe has internalized the regional ideology, which, along with the stories told to her by her grandmother, has shaped her relationship to ethnicity. The frame acts as a focusing device and just as with paintings or photos, the characteristics—color, texture, width of the frame—will influence how the viewer sees what is within the frame. Mary Ann Caws has theorized that framing passages “serve as the highly worked borders to make the essential point: the selective function is of double interest, in the selection itself and in the on-going process of how the choice is designated” (11). By bordering the family drama of her novel with a collective consciousness of memory and the witnessing of the ethnic neighborhood’s destruction, De Rosa redirects attention to both of these elements within the frame.

E. STORYTELLING IN *PAPER FISH*
Sister to a chronically ill child, Carmolina spends much of her time with her paternal grandmother, Doria, and then runs away from home in an effort to keep her family from putting her sister in a home. As in Waldo’s *A Cup of the Sun*, in *Paper Fish*, a southern Italian ideology of honor and shame is at work, not because the girls’ sexual reputations are at risk, but because everyone in the neighborhood knows about Doriana’s condition and the BellaCasas fear gossip. Grandma Doria is especially concerned with the family’s reputations; “Grandma said the family was talked about, everybody they talk about Doriana” (69). As an ancestor figure and head of the BellaCasa extended family, Grandma Doria supersedes the authority of Carmolina’s parents and captivates eight-year-old Carmolina with stories of growing up in Italy (15) and of crossing the ocean to South America and then to the United States. De Rosa renders the grandmother’s stories in language that reflects orality and the speech patterns of a woman speaking a second language influenced by her native Italian language. Significantly, Carmolina also listens to Grandma Doria tell of her earlier life in the neighborhood where she and her husband owned a grocery store (43, 71). While Carmolina’s relationship to Italian ethnicity is formed entirely by the grandmother’s memories of a pastoral Italy, the stories of the BellaCasa family in Chicago along with her own experiences construct her relationship to Italian American ethnicity that is community based.

Throughout the novel, the family sends Carmolina on errands through the streets of the neighborhood where she encounters street vendors, storeowners, neighbors and more family. De Rosa renders bits of the post World War II neighborhood culture encountered by Carmolina as she roams the neighborhood. Some of the characters who occupy the minoritized space are: Gustavo the ragpicker and his blind horse, the dying Father Anthony and the church women who wear black to daily mass, Giuppetto who sells vegetables from a horse drawn wagon,
gypsies who set up shop in the empty storefronts, the Seedman, and Mrs. Schiavone the butcher’s wife who chops the heads off of chicken in front of Carmolina. De Rosa’s descriptions of these seemingly pre-industrial village figures document an aspect of 1949 urban culture that contests the popular national perception of this post-World War II era of industrial growth and modernization. As Fetterley and Pryse’s theory suggests, the regional values of Carmolina’s circle of neighbors who keep a close watch on Carmolina provide an alternative to how the post-war era in the majority space is represented as dedicated to suburban isolation, household appliances, and car culture.

De Rosa positions Carmolina as witness not only to the stories of Grandma Doria’s past personal history, but also to the neighborhood people. Aarons claims it is common in American Jewish fiction that “storytelling is both narrative construct and the ‘action’ that dramatizes it.” She writes, “a community of ‘listeners’ is established ... wherein characters become active participants—witnesses— to the stories of others in the fictive community, stories that mirror their own” (17). Fetterley and Pryse claim that the focus on story and storyteller is common to many texts that are tied to region: “[R]egional narratives emphasize their link to an oral tradition in part by the use of dialect, but even more in the way storytelling and the relation between storyteller, story and reader/listener become woven into these narratives” (17-18). Thus, in this ethnic region, Carmolina not only receives stories of her grandmother, but also the stories of others as she moves around the neighborhood.

When Carmolina runs away, it is the neighborhood that collectively rallies for the BellaCasa family and searches for the missing girl. De Rosa contrasts the neighborhood’s collective concern with the dominant culture’s response represented by the police who file a missing person’s report. De Rosa’s description of the paperwork and the lack of urgency
critique the police’s response: “The surface of his desk was covered with paper, engorged with paper, uncountable piles and sheets of paper demanded the appearance of one man in court, the search of a woman’s apartment, the seizure if possible of a delinquent child” (81). In De Rosa’s novel the neighbors take to the streets to look for Carmolina, as the police saunter to their typewriters. While she has value in the minoritized space, Carmolina’s disappearance is of little concern to the representatives of the majority culture who view the ethnic girl’s disappearance as a weakness of her father; the clerk who types up the missing child report says, “‘What the shit kind of guy waits three days to report his own damn kid missing’” (82).

Carmolina moves around the neighborhood with security and ease, but once she runs away and leaves Little Italy, she encounters prejudice and scorn. As LaGuerre explains, the minoritized space is a haven from prejudice and discrimination. Once outside of the neighborhood boys taunt her, asking, “You the dago kid come and dirty up our street?” (27). At a diner, when she is identified physically as Italian, the counter man says, “Ain’t no dago kids live here... Ain’t no dagos here anywhere” (77). Encountering these attitudes, outside of the ethnic neighborhood, highlights the inter-ethnic values of the Taylor Street region where families of multiple ethnicities peacefully reside in Carmolina’s building.

As in Waldo’s novel, the train signals the way out of the neighborhood and Carmolina takes the streetcar when she runs away. The train is also symbolic of both the alienation brought on by industrialization and the escape from it. Leo Marx writes that the train “is a cause of alienation in the root sense of the word” that the noise of it “makes inaudible” and “so estranges” a person “from the immediate source of meaning and value” (27). In the culture of “abandoned difference” the train provides mobility and escape as it blots out the rider’s consciousness and moves through landscape, village and city.
In De Rosa’s novel set in the late 1940s, the train takes the form of the streetcar which De Rosa writes: “was painted red with big yellow letters on the side that said City of Chicago” (72), and in fact this is the one and only time that the name Chicago appears in the novel. In the small scale of De Rosa’s neighborhood, the streetcar functions to take her far from her familiar street as the train takes the boys to war in Waldo’s novel. While Carmolina is “flying off alone” (72) on the streetcar, she does so, not to escape the constraints of her family or society, but to keep her family together by trying to prevent sister Doriania’s institutionalization.

De Rosa’s description echoes a familiar scene of departure which is similar to what many characters who leave home experience in American literature. However, instead of adventuring into the wider world as characters in Winesburg, Ohio will do, De Rosa’s imagery confines, imprisons and traps. In this quote, there is no possibility of escape into dreams:

The old train rattled down the tracks, shaking its sides, shaking Carmolina at the back of the car. The car was hooked into the electric line above it through a steel cable; the train shook its windows in their frames and rattled down the street with its steel finger curved up, as though it stole its energy from the sun. Carmolina peeked out the window from behind the steel grating. The grating covered half the window so people wouldn’t break into the train at night and steal the seats. She could not see above it. It crisscrossed the world with mesh and the sun shining into the car fell in shredded patches on her head, face, lap. Everything shook quickly in Carmolina’s eyes, stopped, then shook again. . . . No one knew she was in the car. She passed them all, the neighbors, the people who knew her, and they were out there behind the glass and the grating on the
street and she was behind the grate and the noise, with her fingers in her ears, running away. (74)

Carmolina’s sensory perceptions are alienated or completely cut off by the machinery of the streetcar. Her body is physically shaken, her sight impaired, her hearing impeded by the machine, which slices and shreds even nature represented by the sunlight.

Instead of viewing the blank landscape which gives regional characters like Winesburg, Ohio’s George Willard the opportunity “to paint the dreams of his manhood” (Anderson 153), the streetcar offers Carmolina only views of the neighborhood people: Tony the barber, Pasquale’s Indian wife Anna, old Giupetto, Giovanni the watermelon man, and “the brown faces of all the mothers bobbing like burned apples” (74). When the streetcar passes Gustavo the Ragman, Carmolina again falls into storytelling and collective memory. De Rosa writes:

The car stopped by Gustavo. Carmolina slipped down in her seat, watched out of saucer eyes the face of Gustavo. When Gustavo came to America, Grandma said, he brought with him his wife Maria. They crossed the ocean together and tossed in the ship’s belly with the kerosene lamp above them. Terrified of fire, of one flame turning the ship of immigrants into a holocaust on the sea, they held each other’s shoulders and with their eyes closed, prayed one hundred and nine novenas. (74)

In the neighborhood ideology, which is reinforced by Grandma’s storytelling, Carmolina is trapped in the collective ethnic past even as she geographically crosses out of the neighborhood. Leaving the ethnic enclave, the train evokes a harrowing experience with echoes of steerage. On De Rosa’s Berrywood Street, Fisher’s “abandoned difference” is not one of
Carmolina’s options, and like Niobe, she carries the neighborhood’s transnational stories with her.

F. CONCLUSION

National needs always outweigh minoritized space. The regional ethnic community cannot hold together in the face of a national crisis like World War II, which invades the neighborhood and the lives of the community members, nor can it resist the majority space’s need for expansion when there is a new University to be built. The minoritized space of the ethnic region will always be sacrificed for the “common good” of the dominant majority culture.

De Rosa wrote *Paper Fish* with the explicit intention to recreate the past and the working-class neighborhood she knew. In an interview she stated:

“I wanted the neighborhood to live again, to recreate it and so many of the people I was close to, especially my grandmother and father who had both died. I think I was haunted by it all. I wanted to make those people and that neighborhood alive again. I wanted the readers of the book to care about it, to realize that something beautiful had existed and that it was gone. Taylor Street had become a myth of terrible beauty and terrible ugliness. It was a world complete unto itself. The further I got away from it, the more I could see it as a small, beautiful, peculiar world” (qtd in Gardaphe, *Leaving 77*).

That she views the text as an accurate historical recreation *and* also a closed system or “a world complete unto itself,” reflects the way Fetterley and Pryse conceptualize “region.” Like many historical fiction writers, De Rosa’s passion to write the past assumes a discontent with the
present, and thus, *Paper Fish* can be read as both a commentary on the past era as well as the writer’s present time period. Philip Fisher writes that:

[T]he historical novel is a device for practicing how to meet a certain but postponed future. It is a psychological rehearsal that creates an ordered resignation [and] lets a group ‘face’ a future that they have already chosen and set in motion, but have not yet morally or psychologically passed through. The historical novel trains resignation and gives an elevated moral tone to stoic regret. (*Hard Facts* 13)

Both Waldo and De Rosa, write novels of living memory that function as historical novels to bear witness to what role mythologized community life plays in the internal life of characters after the minoritized space of the ethnic region is gone.

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1 Dodge claims that in the “Eurocentric concept of Americanness, Ellis Island is seen as the seminal site of modern America’s origin” (157). While she discusses autobiographies, she claims that the stories of non-European immigrants that “were processed through Angel Island in California, Nogales in southern Arizona, Florida’s coastal peninsula, or one of the nation’s other entry’s points” have not been given equal attention and “have been subsumed within a master narrative of immigration that does not adequately consider how race complicates the assimilation plot within the autobiographies of non-European immigrants” (158).

2 See Ferraro’s introduction to *Ethnic Passages*; he writes, “The dismissal of ethnic writing as a version of regionalism dates back to the first decades of this [twentieth] century, was taken for granted during the mid-century heyday of canonical consensus, and is still with
us (if behind closed doors) today. When identified as regional, writing by and about immigrants is labeled parochial, transient, and delusive simultaneously: self-congratulation and public relations masquerading, just barely, as literary art” (2).

3 Fisher goes on to claim that in the late twentieth century a new regionalism developed out of identity politics. He writes, “The regionalism of our own times is a regionalism of gender, race, sexual orientation, and later ethnicities imagined on a racial model—Chicano identity, Asian-American identity” (Still 184). This configuration also threatens an unified American identity, as the other ways of thinking about region have before. Tracing these new regions to the rights movements of the 1960s, Fisher claims, “These new regional forms of identity were the first within American experience that neither mobility nor intermarriage nor the passage of generations would alter. Earlier geographic or ethnic regional identities had usually been temporary and subject to reaffirmation or neglect by every new generation that might move or intermarry or simply forget to honor and proclaim southernness or Italian-Americanness. The very mechanisms of culture would erase them over time” (Still 185).

4 The national discourse of World War II impacts both novels; however in Paper Fish the absence of narration about the war is problematic. Whether Carmelina’s father or uncles participate in the war is never addressed in the novel. For more on how World War II impacted the neighborhood Paper Fish is based on see the documentary 5,000 Miles From Home: The Untold Story of Chicago’s Italian Americans and World War II (2009).

5 Bernard-Donals and Glejzer study written accounts and audio/visual recordings of Holocaust survivors and claim that testimonies of World War II era experiences function on the edges between memory and history. Part of their analysis examines how the witnesses’ accounts are marked by distinct language features such as stutters, breakages, and voids. These elements “... mark a point between witness and testimony that can be seen as a moment of trauma, a moment in which the historical real and the memory of it as demanded by the imperative to testify to it disintegrate and present for both the witness and the interviewer ... a break. ... It is, in Cathy Caruth’s words, a moment in which the object ... is ‘grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence’ (1991,187)” (“Between” 2).

6 On October 14, 1918, The Pennsylvanian newspaper reported: “A new health menace threatens: the dead are not being buried fast enough. More than 500 corpses are awaiting burial, some for more than a week. The Office of the Coroner cannot keep up with the demand for death certificates. Cold-storage plants are used as temporary morgues, and the J.G. Brill Company, manufacturers of trolley cars, donates 200 packing crates to be used as coffins. Prisoners from the House of Correction team up with seminarians from St. Charles Seminary to dig graves, as the cemeteries cannot keep up with the demand” (Lynch).

7 See Bernard-Donals and Glejzer introduction to the edited volume Witnessing the Disaster: Essays on Representation and the Holocaust. They again connect their analysis to Caruth’s theory of testimony and write, “In Cathy Caruth’s terms, the event registers on the witness as a void; to survive—to ‘get away apparently unharmed,’ in Freud’s terms—the witness testifies, though the narrative of the event bears at best an oblique relation to what the
Caruth’s point is that testimonial narratives do not disclose history; instead, they disclose—where the narrative most clearly shows its seams—the effect of events upon witnesses.” (“Introduction” 6).

See also Antonio Gramsci’s influential discussion of the north-south divide in Italy “Some Aspects of the Southern Question” where he outlines “what kind of ideology has been disseminated in myriad ways among the masses of the North, by propagandists of the bourgeoisie: the South is the ball and chain which prevents the social development of Italy from progressing more rapidly; the Southerners are biologically inferior beings, semi-barbarians or total barbarians, by natural destiny; if the South is backward, the fault does not lie with the capitalist system or with any other historical cause, but with Nature, which has made the Southerners lazy, incapable, criminal and barbaric...” (173).

Waldo’s use of the name Niobe perhaps characterizes Bartoli’s artistic education but the Greek Mythology also provides some insight. Niobe was one of the favored goddesses who falls to the most tragic of ends. According to Hamilton’s Mythology, Niobe was the granddaughter of Zeus, “rich and nobly born and powerful.” Because of an arrogant challenge to Leto, Apollo and Artemis punish her by killing all of Niobe’s seven sons and daughters while she watches. Hamilton writes of Niobe as witness: “She saw them die with anguish too great for expression. Beside those bodies so lately young and strong, she sank down motionless in stony grief, dumb as a stone and her heart like a stone within her. Only her tears flowed and could not stop. She was changed into stone which forever, night and day, was wet with tears” (239).

In Glazer and Moynihan’s sociological study of ethnicity, Beyond the Melting Pot (1963), the authors use Waldo’s novel as an example of how the Italian American neighborhood and family take precedence over the development of the individuals within a larger argument about why Italian Americans value community and family over “[t]hat form of individuality and ambition which is identified with Protestant and Anglo-Saxon culture, and for which the criteria of success are abstract and impersonal...” (195). They write: “Conceivably the Italian family nurtures a confident and self-reliant personality by its warmth and dependability and by early gratification of the child’s desires (but studies show that there is a good deal of inconsistency in this gratification which many not be so comforting to the child). But the society of his childhood is ready to punish him if he does seek to leave upon growing up and it is painful to leave in any case because so few do. An Italian-American novel published in 1961 (A Cup of the Sun, by Octavia Waldo) describes the problem of a young Italian American of great sensitivity who wants to become an artist or writer. She is as isolated in her community as she would be in a small Midwest town. She must go away to school, and she knows she will never have anything to come back to. Her development separates her decisively from the friends with whom she grew up.” (198)

Starting over is always problematic in American novels, however other characters set out possessing the belief that they can start over, something that neither Waldo nor De Rosa allow for their characters.
See Matthew Frye Jacobson’s “Epilogue: Ethnic Revival and the Denial of White Privilege” for a discussion of the ethnic revival movement of the 1970s and several of its key promoters and critics. He writes, “[A]mong the fundamental elements of the ethnic revival is a certain dissonance in postwar whiteness: the emergent ethnics are white without actually feeling white; they are alienated from other whites, and are beginning to identify the reasons why; they feel themselves treated as non-whites and are increasingly angry at white elites who deem their protests less ‘legitimate’ than those of other non-whites” (276).

See George Rosen’s political history of the transition from neighborhood to campus, *Decision-Making Chicago-Style: The Genesis of a University of Illinois Campus*. Federally funded urban renewal plans attracted the University to the neighborhood. When the city announced that the Harrison-Halsted area was the favored site for the new campus, the Italian American neighborhood residents lead by Florence Scala spearheaded the protests and legal actions along with several members of the Hull-House administration. The last of the lawsuits was dismissed in May 1963, and the demolition of the Taylor Street neighborhood began immediately. The University of Illinois at Chicago opened for students in 1965.

Dated “Fall, 1978” in the cover acknowledgements, this copy of the typescript is located in Box 120, titled “Tina De Rosa Materials (author of Paper Fish)” of the Jerre Mangione Papers at the University of Rochester Library. The box also includes correspondence between the two writers spanning from 1979-1986, and several articles by De Rosa. Subsequent references to this typescript will be cited in text as TS JMP.

De Rosa’s father died in 1965. She later went on to earn a Masters of Arts degree in English from the University of Illinois at Chicago and even worked for the university for several years after graduating.

See University of Illinois at Chicago, University Library, Department of Special Collections, University Archives, UA neg. UA90-999-438. [Link to photos](http://tigger.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/urbanexp/main.cgi?file=img/show_image_generic.ptt&image=176). The photos on this website collection show the clearing of the Harrison-Halsted Street neighborhood in 1964 during the demolition and documents the preservation of the two Hull-House buildings. For photographic histories of the demolition, see also the Office of UIC Historian website “Permanent Campus Site Selection, 1958-1963” [Link](http://www.uic.edu/depts/uichistory/permanentcampus.html), Sharon Haar’s “Urban Archeology” website [Link](http://www.arch.uic.edu/urbanarch/mainpage.html), and *Urban Experience in Chicago: Hull-House and Its Neighborhoods, 1889-1963*, [Link](http://www.uic.edu/jaddams/hull/urbanexp/introduction/introduction.htm) sponsored by the UIC College of Architecture and the Arts and the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum.

See also the University Archives clipping files in the Special Collections at the Daley Library for more complete newspaper coverage of the protests and demolition; see especially University General History and Development Box 9, folders 92-99. Also in Special Collections, the Florence Scala collection and the Tina De Rosa collection have more background material on how the campus impacted the Italian American community in general and the Scala and De Rosa families in particular.
Bernard-Donals and Glejzer distinguish between history and living memory; they write, “But living memory is not history; witnessing the event, and having been in the train, does not guarantee that its representations will not be inaccurate, or ineffective, or simply wrong. It fact, living memory is not so much the recuperation of events as it is an imprint of the loss of the event, and narrative histories, built as a bulwark against memory’s loss, stand in for and replace the event” (“Introduction” 5)

IV. UNRELIABLE DREAMERS: RESTORING THE MEMORY
in Rachel Guido deVries’ Tender Warriors,
Dorothy Bryant’s Miss Giardino
and Carole Maso’s Ghost Dance

As witnesses, characters function to bring attention to historical events and communities. Even in the fragmented and dialectic narratives of De Rosa and Waldo, the reader engages in the memories evoked by the writers. However, Italian American novelists have also exploited the absence of the character’s memory to pique the reader’s attention and construct a dramatic irony that highlights how ethnic narratives have been utilized by the wider society. By constructing their novels around the lack of their characters’ memory, Rachel Guido deVries, Dorothy Bryant and Carole Maso engage in the long-standing tradition of novels whose narrators are unreliable. As Suzanne Keen writes:

To say a narrator is unreliable is not a value judgment; it differs radically from an accusation of lying. It suggests instead that a writer deliberately exploits the readers' awareness that the version of the story retailed by the narrator should be treated with skepticism. (42)

African American writers like James Weldon Johnson and Ralph Ellison have used the unreliable narrators in The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912) and Invisible Man (1952) to create skepticism about what constitutes racial identity for American society. Other
modernist writers have used the unreliability of their narrators to question established ideals or universal truths in other areas of culture; for example, William Faulkner uses Quentin’s unreliability to question a number of Southern ideals in *The Sound and the Fury*, while in Ford Maddox Ford’s *The Good Soldier*, Dowell cannot be trusted in his idealistic characterization of the relationships that dominate the novel.

When Italian American writers like Rachel Guido deVries, Dorothy Bryant and Carole Maso use unreliable narrators in their novels—*Tender Warriors* (1986), *Miss Giardino* (1978) and *Ghost Dance* (1986)—the complexity of their narrative structures encourages skepticism about the elements that construct ethnic relationships in their novels. Through fragmented and multiple perspectives, dreams, and memories, each writer calls attention to the role storytelling plays in keeping the past present and in challenging a dominant or oppressive system of authority. Embedded in each of these novels are dream narratives—a modernist device that deVries, Bryant, and Maso reconstitute as an ethnic form. Framed within the wider narratives, dreams are an ideal form to represent unreliability because as Herschel Farbman has written, “Only the dreamer can see his or her dream, and only the dreamer can tell its tale. No one can corroborate or contest the dreamer’s tale” (8). In other words, the dream depends on the storyteller to give it shape. DeVries, Bryant, and Maso connect dreams embedded in their novels with each narrator’s unreliability.

In the family drama, *Tender Warriors*, it is the character of Sonny DeMarco which deVries immediately marks as unreliable. In the first section, written in Sonny’s perspective, Sonny claims that he calls his mother on the telephone every Sunday, but deVries’ second chapter takes place at the mother’s grave. By switching to Sonny’s sister Rose’s point of view, deVries contradicts for the reader many of the things Sonny has just related—mainly that he
does not talk to his mother every Sunday by telephone because she has died almost two years before.

The second novel under discussion in this chapter, Bryant’s *Miss Giardino*, opens with the retired teacher, Anna Giardino, in the hospital where she is recovering from an alleged mugging that she cannot recall. Over the course of a week, Anna tries to remember the recent events through conversations with other characters, dreams, and letters from her former students and colleagues. Bryant feeds the return of more distant memories from Anna’s past in ways that contradict the assumptions Anna has about the mugging, her multi-ethnic neighborhood and her place within the community’s history.

In Maso’s *Ghost Dance*, Vanessa’s role as unreliable narrator unfolds more slowly as she relates the events proceeding and following the death of her mother. Vanessa invents and narrates scenes as she wishes they were, allowing Maso to address what falls short or what is left out of the story. Further, it is Vanessa herself who provides skepticism about what her mother Christine has said and done. Maso uses the repetition and lyrical exaggeration in Vanessa’s narration along with disruptive fragmentation, to subtly undermine the reader’s confidence in Vanessa’s competency to know with certainty what has happened, let alone to tell of it.

“What makes a narrator unreliable,” Seymour Chatman writes: “is that his [or her] values diverge strikingly from that of the implied author—that is, the rest of the narrative, ‘the norm of the work’, conflicts with the narrator’s presentation and we [as readers] become suspicious of [the unreliable narrator’s] sincerity or competency to tell the true version” (149). Chatman’s operational definition addresses the problems of how Sonny, Anna, and Vanessa, as unreliable storytellers, contest, oppose, or challenge the stories that the rest of the narrative
wants the reader to consider, and how the narrative restores the readers' trust in their versions of the story. This chapter examines how deVries, Bryant and Maso undermine the authority of their characters in order to question the role of dominant power structures such as the traditionally ethnic patriarchal family, state institutions of schooling, a capitalist society, and, in a more general fashion, the systems that construct culture and history.

A. UNRELIABILITY AND ETHNICITY

Most discussions of unreliable narrators in literary works owe the terms of their debate to Wayne Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). Booth’s argument depends heavily on what he calls the implied author, which is not the physical, historical person who writes the text, nor is it the narrator of the fictional piece. Instead the implied author is “an implied version of ‘himself,’” a “second self” persona that constructs the narrative (70-71). Booth ties the term “narrator” to “the speaker in the work who is after all only one of the elements created by the implied author and who may be separated from him [or her] by large ironies” (73). As an intermediary of sorts between the flesh and blood writer and the invented narrators of a text, Booth explains:

Our sense of the implied author includes not only the extractable meanings but also the moral and emotional content of each bit of action and suffering of all of the characters. It includes, in short, the intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole; the chief value to which this implied author is committed, regardless of what party his creator belongs to in real life, is that which is expressed by the total form. (73-74)
In other words, Booth’s notion of the implied author encompasses, in more contemporary
terms, each novel’s distinct system of discourse\textsuperscript{1} which also represents the novel’s values and
politics. Booth includes the elements “style,” “tone,” and “technique” in “the core of norms and
choices” that make up this implied author. In James Phelan’s discussion of The Rhetoric of
Fiction’s ideas about unreliability, he contextualizes Booth’s construction of the implied author
as a response to:

- two contemporary theoretical positions: (1) the aesthetic ideal of impersonality,
  the driving force behind the diction that authors should not tell and, that in
  showing, should remain neutral toward their representations; (2) the New
  Critical stance against authorial intention as a guide to interpretation, famously
  expressed in W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley’s ‘Intentional Fallacy’ and
  its diction that what the author intended to achieve is not relevant to the critic’s
  judgment of that achievement. (38-39)

By constructing the implied author based on the textual evidence of the novel’s discourse,
Booth and other critics are thus licensed to discuss a character’s unreliability as a deviation
from the implied author’s norms without having to commit the New Critical “crimes” of going
outside of the text to discuss the physical, historical writer. Booth’s analysis also preserves the
text’s unity constructed by the implied author as a central issue.

Booth’s discussion of the unreliable narrator makes explicit that the audience must be in
agreement with how the implied author judges the unreliable narrator, and therefore texts that
utilize unreliable narration “make stronger demands on the reader’s powers of inference”
(Booth 159). Other critics agree, although some do not find this added difficulty an asset.
William Riggan claims that often “direct support or correction is absent, thereby rendering the
question of a particular narrator’s reliability as a source of values and judgment and as the purveyor of a factual account even more problematical...”; Riggan goes even further to say, “For both the critical and casual reader, the literacy, cunning, and seductiveness of these narrators often pose considerable problems for comprehension and interpretation of the works in which they appear” (13). However, Booth maintains not only is this kind of reading, which is in “communion” or “deep collusion” with the implied author, a source of pleasure for the audience, but that the relationship and shared knowledge between the two is necessary for “dramatic irony” (307, 175). In other words, the readers and the implied author know more than the unreliable narrators and enjoy the process of recognizing when or how the narration is deviating from the rest of the text’s discourse to reveal the character as unreliable.

In texts that foreground specific ethnicities or that utilize specific ethnic forms of storytelling, the relationship between implied author, audience and unreliable narrator becomes even more complex. Phelan outlines Ansgar Nünning’s discussion of what readers bring to the interpretation of unreliable narrators:

Nünning identifies two main kinds of conceptual frameworks relevant to reader’s judgments of unreliability: (1) extraliterary, having to do with knowledge of the real world and cultural codes, assumptions about human behavior, awareness of the social, moral, and linguistic norms existing at the time of represented action in the narrative and the reader’s individual perspective on these and other matters; and (2) literary, having to do with the knowledge of conventions, stereotypes, genres, styles, intertexts, and with the specific structures of the texts under consideration. (Phelan 44)
Nünning insists readers’ ability to identify unreliability depends on their prior knowledge of “real world and cultural codes” as well as the literary conventions used. Working with Nünning’s assumptions, the ethnic writer who constructs a text with an unreliable narrator has to consider the readers’ familiarity with the ethnic cultural codes and ethnic literary conventions he or she uses. The reader of an ethnic text that uses unreliability must be able to read for the ethnic cultural codes well enough to determine when the unreliable narrator is deviating from the novel’s discourse. The ethnic implied author, which bases the style, tone, structure and other elements on ethnic patterns and characteristics, demands that the reader also be fluent in the ethnic cultural codes to comprehend the deviation of the unreliable narrator. In a time when ethnic novels are still often taught using a sociological approach, that is, as representative texts that “teach” an unfamiliar reader about the ethnic culture portrayed in the text, an ethnic novel which utilizes an unreliable narrator runs a greater risk of being misread, misunderstood, or even passed over by readers. The demands that unreliable narrators ask of readers are therefore compounded in ethnic texts.

Italian American writers who use unreliable narrators have, in part, circumvented these added difficulties with their texts in two main ways. First, by writing about multi-ethnic communities that include Italian Americans living and interacting significantly with other ethnic characters and concerns, these novels do not function as texts that are primarily representative of Italian American ethnic culture. That is, the three novels under discussion in this chapter in particular do not define their characters’ ethnicity by their interaction with a group of other Italian Americans or in a specifically Italian American community. Instead, *Tender Warriors’* Sonny, *Miss Giardino’s* Anna, and *Ghost Dance’s* Vanessa will be found the majority of the time outside of an Italian American community and interacting with a diverse
mixture of characters from other ethnicities, races, and classes. These texts portray characters who are less representative of groups of Italian Americans, but who have specific experiences that speak for the wider ethnic American community. The second way these writers alleviate the additional potential problems is that deVries, Bryant, and Maso base their unreliable narrators’ deviation on the lack of or absence of memory. Each text’s discourse re-teaches the character his or her own past—ethnic, national, and/or individual. In *Tender Warriors*, *Ghost Dance*, and *Miss Giardino*, the ethnic implied authors control the release of information by having to rebuild the memories of their unreliable narrators and are able to manipulate the readers’ response to the deviations through the rest of the discourse.

Even though the use of an unreliable narrator poses additional problems, the narrative convention highlights the role that storytelling plays in constructing knowledge. Riggan identifies “dissimulation and reticence” as the two main components of unreliable narration, the “byproducts” of which are “wisdom and/or delight” (173). Riggan’s categorization of unreliable narrators employing “dissimulation and reticence” works to create skepticism, and may explain some of the appeal for ethnic writers like deVries, Bryant, and Maso. According to Riggan, unreliable narration can “achiev[e] a transvaluation of stated negative values and implied positive ones and attai[n] composite new values through sympathetic understanding of human fraility and experience” (176). By masking or withholding information, an unreliable narrator destabilizes the values behind the critical appraisal in which he or she engages. For instance, if Sonny denounces the Italian American family in *Tender Warriors*, once the reader realizes Sonny’s unreliability, the criticism becomes suspect. Riggan claims, “Whatever the effect of discovered narrative unreliability in terms of our attitude toward the respected narrators, a perhaps more significant consequence is that the discovery forces us into a
confrontation with the slippery nature of truth” (182). Even though deVries’ implied author may restore the trust a reader has in Sonny’s opinions, the reader is forced into a reevaluation of Sonny’s opinion, and in all likelihood, the reader will change his or her interpretation of the Italian American family. The ethnic writer can use the convention of unreliability to interrogate the complex relationships which construct ethnicity and subtly challenge accepted stereotypes while investigating the issues which determine those ideas.

Werner Sollors has written that ethnicity “is not a thing but a process—and it requires constant detective work from readers, not a settling on a fixed encyclopedia of supposed cultural essentials” (Invention xv). For writers who agree with Sollors, the use of unreliable narrators is one way to force readers into rethinking the relationships that comprise ethnicity while maintaining sympathy for the character. Keen describes the appeal of using the unreliable narration: “That there is no way finally to decide questions about narrative reliability through formal tests is part of what makes it such a perennial discussion topic in the literature classroom. Readers are bound to disagree, and from those disagreements come the contesting interpretations so prized by teachers of literature” (44). The indeterminate conventions of unreliable narrators, similar to the changing definitions of ethnicity, are determined by the relationships and ideas readers bring to the text. As other writers have used unreliable narrators to challenge, complicate and question, Italian American writers have deployed unreliability as one way to redefine ethnicity.

B. PHELAN’S AXES OF UNRELIABILITY

In Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration (2005), Phelan builds on Booth’s discussion of unreliable narrators by refining and significantly expanding
Booth’s ideas about the differences between narrating facts and narrating values. Phelan’s theory claims that: “Narrators perform three main roles—reporting, interpreting, and evaluating.” He proposes a process that “differentiates between kinds of unreliability,” and that “attends to” “narrator functions,” “disclosure functions” as well as the “authorial audience functions.” Phelan believes that these functions execute in relation to each other and often deviate from the implied author “in one or more of the roles simultaneously, sequentially, or intermittently” (50). He complicates Booth’s terms to account for the more complex forms of unreliability that he finds at work in texts like The Remains of the Day or the non-fictional memoir Angela’s Ashes. Phelan writes:

The metaphor of axes of unreliability helps to differentiate among different kinds of deviation: unreliable reporting occurs along the axis of characters, facts, and events; unreliable reading (or interpreting) occurs along the axis of knowledge and perception; and unreliable regarding (or evaluating) occurs along the axis of ethics and evaluation. (50)

These three narrative actions are further diversified by how the ideal or authorial audience reads the unreliability. Once the readers “determine that a narrator’s words can’t be taken at face value,” they react in one of two different ways. They either “reject those words and, if possible reconstruct a more satisfactory account” or they “accept what the narrator says but then supplement the account” (50-51). By combining the three axes of unreliability with the audience’s two responses, Phelan identifies six types of unreliability: misreporting, misreading, misregarding, and underreporting, underreading, and underregarding. By isolating how each type functions along the three axes, Phelan’s theory helps to identify the elements which deVries, Bryant, and Maso use to interrogate ethnicity through their unreliable narrators.
C. **TENDER WARRIORS: SONNY**

Rachel Guido deVries’ *Tender Warriors* presents an Italian American family that has fallen apart after the death of Josephine DeMarco, the mother. Her three children, Rose, Lorraine and Sonny, have established lives separate from each other and have distanced themselves from their father Dominic because of his abusive temper. A fight with Dominic has caused Sonny, the brother, to sever his ties with all the family but in the meantime a brain disorder stemming from a lifelong illness has temporarily erased his memory of Josephine’s death. The oldest sister Rose DeMarco, a pediatrics nurse and aspiring photographer, steps into the maternal role of Josephine and tries to bring the family together. Rose reaches out to her prodigal sister Lorraine, a recovered drug user, and together with Dominic, they try to locate Sonny in time for Josephine’s memorial mass.

Written in limited third person point of view, throughout *Tender Warriors*, deVries’ implied author switches perspective-bearing characters from chapter to chapter and sometimes within chapters. Also called “reflectors” by narrative theorists these perspective-bearing characters are differentiated from the implied author which mediates between what the reflectors know and what the writer wants to reveal. With every switch in reflector, the implied author reveals its omniscience and reminds the reader of the scope of the text. The main reflectors in the novel are Sonny and Rose who complement each other, but most of the other characters including Dominic, Lorraine, and Sonny’s friends, Moses and Lucinda, get at least one of their own sections. The combined effect of including each of the sections individuates the experiences, yet collectively form the multifaceted story. In Bakhtinian terms, *Tender Warriors* is a dialogical text, which discards the central single authoritative voice and replaces it with a plurality of independent consciousnesses and unmerged voices (Bakhtin 365). In
addition to the multiple perspectives, the narrative has access to daydreams, sleeping dreams and memories, all of which are represented on a textual level by italics in the sections that focus on Sonny. As Bryant will do in Miss Giardino, dreams and memories of the past are marked by the text as different even on the visual level of print. The italics privilege these types of stories that originate in what theorist Jay Clayton has called “archaic symbolic modes of knowledge”—rituals, dreams and magic (95).

These sections that depict sleeping dreams, daydreams, and memories of the past not only address overt ethnic memories and characters, but they convey ethnic ways of knowing. That is, the stories and interpretations of sleep dreams are important facets of Italian American popular folk culture transported by the immigrants who supplemented their organized religious practices with traditional Italian beliefs in the supernatural. Malpezzi and Clements discuss the importance of reading dreams for Italian Americans in their chapter on “Folk Supernaturalism” and write:

Dreams may be particularly reliable prognosticators of coming misfortune.

Often an Italian American would expect bad luck if he or she dreamed of old wood, descending a ladder, tooth loss, babies, an enemy, raw meat, rat, a wedding, muddy water, a banquet, floods, storms, coal, or money. While dreams of these subjects indicated general bad luck, other dreams were interpreted more specifically; snakes meant that one was a victim of gossip and teeth or an egg forewarned of the loss of a friend, for instance. (130)

By embedding dream narratives into Sonny’s sections, deVries’ implied author relies on ethnic narrative conventions to privilege the information presented in the dreamscape and to contrast how Sonny perceives his waking world. Sonny’s dreams are the most traditionally marked
ethnic scenes in *Tender Warriors*. They are populated by aunts, grandparents, or saints who enact ethnic type-scenes of dinners or holidays or show symbolic religious scenes like the recurring appearances of St. Lucy offering her eyes on a plate. The dreams are overtly symbolic regardless of the readers’ familiarity with Italian cultural mythology:

> In the dream [Sonny] saw his Sicilian grandmother, the one they told him was a witch. She told him to come with her and she would teach him what he wanted to know. She spoke Sicilian, which he didn’t know, but he understood her perfectly. She had his father’s face, only thinner, and while Dominic was almost bald, she had thick black hair and a widow’s peak. She told Sonny she knew magic, but he knew she wanted him to die. That’s why she beckoned him to go with her. In the dream he pulled out a long skinny knife that had just been sharpened. He spoke only once in the dream, and that was to say, “I’ll kill you first even if you are dead, even if you want me dead. Because you deserve a death. Capice?” (29)

The dream is marked by Italian language and Italian witchcraft, while the ethnicity of the grandmother is tied to the father, Dominic. Information is presented to Sonny’s unconscious and in a subsequent scene he wields a pocket knife against his father, Rose, and Lorraine because he feels threatened that he cannot find his mother (158-159). Sonny does not remember these dreams, but the images recur throughout the novel and start to infect his waking thoughts as well. The authorial audience recognizes the images as omens within his dreams. Although Sonny cannot read his own dreams and does not recognize their significance, as time passes he refuses to even try to understand them.
In Phelan’s terms, Sonny’s brain disorder, signaled in the text by his ever intensifying headaches, inhibits his abilities to report, read and evaluate the ethnic information in the dreams. His unreliability, therefore, spans all three axes. Of characters, facts, and events, Sonny misreports the death of his mother to Moses and Lucinda (17, 41). On the axis of knowledge and perception, he cannot read the ethnic form of the dreams, nor the Italian American symbols and characters that give clues to his mother’s passing. In one dream he holds the prayer card from his mother’s funeral home visitation which depicts the St. Lucy image on one side, and the date of Josephine’s death on the other. After describing the card and the pounding of Sonny’s headache within the dream, deVries writes: “He couldn’t read any more—the card, the date, the picture of St. Lucy all blurred—just Josephine, the sound whispered along his spine, Josephine, Josephine” (123-124). He still can’t remember his mother’s death with all the information presented to him, although he has remembered many other things from his past throughout the novel. Phelan claims that “misreading is also a sign of a mistaken value system” so in Sonny’s case, not only does he misread the importance of his dreams, his dismissal of them indicates a displaced appreciation for the ethnic ways of knowing that deVries’ implied author wants the reader to consider in other parts of the text. For example, Rose, Lorraine, and Dominic all exhibit abilities to read the supernatural signs and symbols that appear in their nocturnal dreamscape or their waking daydreams (115, 136, 146).

On the third of Phelan’s axes, that of “ethics and evaluation,” Sonny’s unreliability shows that he willingly denies the warning signs—first, that his headaches are worsening and later, that the memories of his dreams continue to present information which he refuses to consider. Phelan claims, “denials suggest that at least [on] some level of consciousness” a character knows of “the truth” (51). Sonny’s denial of the dream images and his refusal to
consider them indicate his denial of the ethnicity represented in the dreams. His denial forces
the reader to consider the trauma that ethnicity has caused for him and the rest of the
DeMarcos. The implied author of *Tender Warriors* uses Sonny’s unreliability to interrogate the
family structure, which is presented as an ethnic structure, and in the process reconstitutes those
kin relationships.

In the first section of *Tender Warriors*, deVries’ implied author emphasizes what Sonny
DeMarco “knows,” what he “sees,” and what he “remembers.” In the very opening lines
deVries suggests that Sonny himself has doubts about what he knows; she writes:

> This much he knew for sure: he was damned if he was going to let anybody—
> not even his father—stop him from getting by. Seven months had passed since
> they had the fight and he had left, or been thrown out, depending on how you
> wanted to look at it. (11)

The orality of the language is very strong and deVries establishes a storytelling vernacular.
Amy Nauss Millay, synthesizing Walter J. Ong’s work, writes that “there are differences in
‘mentality’ between oral and writing cultures” and “that oral thought is tied closely to memory
and open-ended communication, whereas print fosters a sense of closure and fixation” (17). By
representing oral elements in their texts, deVries, like Bryant and Maso, attempts to destabilize
that definitive authority. “[O]ral communication is participatory, formulaic, thematically
organized and repetitive,” Ong claims, and “oral cultures do not conceptualize linear history in
the modern sense; rather one witnesses a confluence of present and past, and entanglement of
myth and history” (Millay 17). In their representation of oral speech and sound, repetition, and
vernacular, both *Miss Giardino* and *Ghost Dance*, like *Tender Warriors*, use orality in the
narratives to do more than just suggest skepticism of what the characters recount. Millay writes
that “the outcome of inscribing the oral in written texts is the innovation of a discursive form that aims to subvert ideologies upheld by writing culture” (19). That is, not only does the orality of the characters raise questions about the characters’ abilities to relate the story reliably, but it also raises questions concerning the assumptions about knowledge and authority we ascribe to written texts. While DeVries’ phrase from the opening “depending on how you wanted to look at it” as well as other repeated phrases adds to that oral vernacular, it also indicates an underlying part of the novel’s philosophy—that is, there are multiple ways of seeing at work in the novel and by extension in society. This use of orality previews the importance of the multiple reflectors and challenges the sources of hierarchical power.

In these opening lines the narrator also reveals a resistance to the law of the father who is continually equated with ethnic masculinity and family structure. Sonny’s defiance of Dominic in the phrase “not even his father” quoted above contrasts his need for his mother. Similar to Vanessa in *Ghost Dance*, but in the realm of family instead of Maso’s discursive history, Sonny’s driving tension—resisting his father while needing his mother—is refracted by each sibling. Growing up, Rose often receives beatings for “talking back” to Dominic despite her mother’s advice not to (25) and Lorraine’s drug use, another way of opting out of Dominic’s rules, also provokes Dominic to beat her terribly (46). Rose immediately marks Dominic’s anger as ethnic—deVries writes: “All that macho Italian stuff and Sonny just too sweet for it” (19). Dominic provokes the paternal defiance, because he believes completely in the structure of the patriarchal Italian American family with himself as the first, final, and only source of authority, and by doing so he turns what may not be personal into the personal. DeVries writes in Dominic’s point of view:
He never let them grow into themselves. He never stopped resenting each of them just a little because they wouldn’t live their lives the way he thought they should. Anything they did that he opposed he took as a sign of their lack of love and respect. (56)

Dominic’s rules and ethnic expectations do not leave room for any individual choice. Mary Jo Bona has connected Dominic’s patriarchal authority to *l’ordine della famiglia*, writing that “the grown children no longer visit the father because his rigidity prevents them from being who they are...” (*Claiming* 172). Dominic’s self-absorption and role as head of the family determines his expectations for how he perceives his family is constituted. He tells Rose:

Nothing’s the way I thought it would be. When I was your age, it was different, it meant something. Family meant something. Marriage, everything was different... Now? Now it’s nothing. Nothing. I got one grandkid I never even see. You, I know about you, Rosie, you’ll never have kids, and Sonny, Jesus, what are we doing? (103).

Thus, the power hierarchy in Dominic’s Italian American family paradigm is linked to the legal institution of marriage which none of the DeMarco siblings have entered into traditionally. Lorraine has a child before she marries, Rose has a long-term relationship with a woman, and Sonny has a platonic relationship with a prostitute.

In addition, Josephine’s passing has left a void in the ethnic family structure, as Dominic cannot function as the husband and father without the ethnic counterpart of Josephine as Italian American wife and mother. As Bona discusses, Josephine’s death worsens the situation between father and children; Bona writes “Josephine DeMarco’s maternal function in the family parallels that of many immigrant mothers, who often mediated between the demands
of the Italian father and the needs of the children” (Claiming 173). Sonny, Rose, and Lorraine all defy Dominic’s masculine authority throughout the book, while they simultaneously mourn the loss of their mother and the effect of her mediation. In particular, Sonny’s denial of Josephine’s death heightens his rebellion against Dominic’s authority.

Although the implied author questions what Sonny knows by depicting the way that his thoughts slip between dream, memory and observation, the novel also shows Sonny to be sure in his conviction that his mother is alive. When his friend Moses asks him about his mother, deVries writes Sonny’s reply: “As far as I know she’s where she always is, living with my old man. I am thinking about her, because it’s been about a month. I’m going to call her tomorrow, Sunday, when the old man’s usually out. He’s a bastard, Moses”’ (17). Once again Sonny’s desire to connect with his mother is coupled with his sidestepping the authority of his father. Sonny’s claim that his mother is living with his old man is challenged by the next chapter which the narrative switches to Rose’s point of view. Before the implied author reveals that Rose is at the cemetery, Rose’s thoughts turn to Sonny’s conflict with Dominic—deVries writes, “The old man never liked Sonny, just because he hadn’t been able to be just like him. As though that were something to wish on anybody” (19). Even as the implied author undermines Sonny’s credibility by revealing he is wrong about Josephine, Rose provides support of his conflict with Dominic, tracing its origin and identifying it specifically with a critique of Italian masculinity, which she furthers in her imagined conversation with Josephine at the gravesite.10 DeVries writes: “Dad is fine. No, he’s not remarried. Who’d want him, huh Momma? I guess you got out the only way you could” (21). Rose acknowledges Josephine’s escape from the hyper-masculine, sometimes violent, patriarchal household environment of Dominic’s making. Josephine’s escape into death highlights each escape, Lorraine to drugs
then a successful interracial marriage, Rose to a profession, an art, and a successful lesbian relationship, and Sonny to the comfortable loneliness of an urban diner.

Interiority dominates *Tender Warriors*, as it does *Miss Giardino* and *Ghost Dance*, and even before the implied author reveals Sonny’s brain disorder, Sonny’s thought processes are characterized as especially insular; deVries writes “Back and forth he went in memory, in time, always a little foggy, always once or twice removed from the way he knew he used to feel, and still over everything he did or thought or saw or felt was a yellow and tender ache of sadness, old and familiar and full of longing” (12). He’s always in a “fog” just a little bit in between daydream and memory, in between feeling and thought. The interiority allows the implied author to emphasize Sonny’s memories of the past, which the reader has to consider with the skepticism directed at Sonny’s consciousness. His fogginess is even given a visual image by Rose in the series of photographs she has been working on since Josephine’s death (24). The diner where Sonny works is full of customers but rather than interacting with them, he watches what they do which sparks his own memories as in this example: He observes how the winos and drunks “kept the social habit” of dinner and coffee. DeVries writes:

> After dinner you always have coffee and a cigarette. Talk about the weather if it’s snowing. Talk about Thunderbird or Ripple or Paisano Red if you’re feeling flush. ...All the same. When there was home they talked about the lasagna or the stuffed Braciole. The artichokes. The meatballs. Or his father’d talk about the war, or how hard he worked. All of them around the table on Sundays at one, right after church, or on holidays with all the aunts and the cousins. He could never eat the meatballs (13).
The implied author again transposes an alternate version of a family structure—that of the homeless men at the diner—and uses the scene to question the traumatic memories of Sonny’s experiences as part of Dominic’s family. Sonny’s observation of the old men in the diner who have no family, slips into his memory of an ethnic type-scene—the Italian American family dinner where the father dominates with his talk of war and work. This is undermined when Sonny remembers how he resists Dominic: “He was only four or five or six at first, and his father never stopped forcing [the meatballs] on him” which Sonny would never eat (13). The non-sexual Sonny rejects perhaps the most recognizable and arguably masculine images of Italianità—the meatballs—which are linked to Dominic’s authority in other points in the novel (30, 106). Stories, even when told to the self, can help a person “escape disciplinary control,” Clayton writes, drawing on the writings of deCerteau and Foucault (97-98). As resistance and escape from the life that Dominic expects of him, Sonny’s slipping back and forth in that interior fog serves to protect him with memories of his past rebellious actions or dreams of beloved females like his mother or sisters. His internal thoughts dominate most sections in his point of view and the combination of thoughts, dreams and memories most often resist the specific Italian masculinity of Dominic.

Near the end of the novel, Sonny does recover his memory of Josephine’s death, but by that time the siblings have rallied together with Dominic instead of against him. The resistance to Dominic’s authority has been transformed into the beginnings of a compromise. Instead of a conventional marriage that is the basis of patriarchal order, the novel restructures the family relationships around a different kind of commitment ritual. The cab driver who delivers Sonny to church repeatedly asks him if he is late for a wedding (182). In this small gesture, the narrative suggests that the family is gathering at Josephine’s memorial mass to be married. In
fact, the novel ends with the four gathered at Sonny’s hospital bed in a circle with Sonny’s interior thoughts about Josephine still dominating. If Dominic’s authority no longer needs to be contested, the sorrow over Josephine’s absence is lessened in the reunion of all the DeMarcos. DeVries’ implied author has reorganized the power structure of the Italian American family to balance Dominic’s patriarchal authority with a multi-ethnic circle of friends, family and lovers.

D. MISS GIARDINO: ANNA

Dorothy Bryant’s Miss Giardino takes place over the course of one week. On Monday morning, Anna Giardino finds herself lying in a hospital bed with no memory of what has occurred. By Sunday, she has reviewed and revisited her past memories as she tries to piece together what happened the night that the garbage collector found her unconscious in front of Camino Real High School where she taught for forty years. The mystery surrounding the alleged attack attracts newspaper publicity and encourages family, friends, former students, and colleagues to visit Anna or write her letters. The attention she receives and the process of trying to regain her memories ignite a crisis for Anna who re-evaluates her present retirement situation as well as what her life’s work as a teacher has meant in the larger sociological sense.

Unlike Tender Warriors’ alternating reflectors, Bryant keeps the focus on Anna’s character in Miss Giardino. However, the implied author does switch between the third person limited point of view which depicts the present time of the novel’s seven days and the italicized first person point of view narration to represent Anna’s memories of the past. The effect Bryant achieves is a kind of self-interview or self-interpretation. In addition to conversations she has with herself, Anna’s main activity in the novel is talking to the other characters. Like DeVries, Bryant depicts an orality that questions the authority of what constitutes knowledge. Janet
Zandy has described the interplay of point of view this way, “[T]he movement of language in the novel—like the process of learning—is dialogic” (171). Occasionally, the novel embeds documents into the text like the letters or newspaper articles that Anna reads. Each chapter focuses on one day and almost always ends with the depiction of a recurring dream Anna has about a fire that burns at Camino Real High School.

In the emphasis on dreams, Bryant utilizes the convention of the dream narrative extensively and connects it to the traditional Italian cultural use of dreams to gather knowledge about the past and future. Thus, Bryant, like deVries, employs an ethnic implied author that requires an added amount of ethnic knowledge from its ideal authorial audience. Although dreams are important across every culture, Bryant, like deVries and Maso, connects them to ethnicity in her novel. In Miss Giardino, initially, Anna’s dreams are about her Italian and Italian American past which signals the ethnic importance of dreams on the level of content as well as form. In the hospital, the text describes Anna drifting in and out of sleep which Bryant marks with italicized text to differentiate the dream from the action. The italicized dream story often ends with dialogue from the nurses who say a variation of “‘Ah, good, you’re awake’” to show Anna has awoken. As the novel progresses, her sleeping naps turn into daydreaming. She wakes up from these later sleep-like reveries and instead of nurses indicating the end of her sleep, the text implies that time has passed through a change in Anna’s environment which mark the duration of the daydream (78, 102). Similar to deVries’ depiction of Sonny’s interiority, Anna’s interior thoughts dominate Miss Giardino in these italicized sections.

Anna’s first dream memory relates her mother’s last hours where, on her deathbed, Mama has a vision of colors and angel wings and then repeats stories about Italy: “‘Like angel wings?’ She smiles. ‘I make no sense.’ Then she is back in her past again. She tells me again
the old story, how she journeyed from the village at the top of the Italian boot, across the ocean, with her three children” (4). The vision within the dream again reflects a supernaturalism that is linked with the ethnic past. The ethnic reader may know that in Italian folklore, “If you dream of a dead person, usually a close relative, it means that they [sic] want help” (Hand 1040). In Sonny’s case, the ethnic reader could interpret that Josephine appears in Sonny’s dreams seeking help to bring the family back together again. Bryant varies the folklore, and different people, both dead and alive, appear in Anna’s dreams to help her regain her memory. The implied author differentiates Anna’s American birth from her mother’s Italian birth while privileging the ethnic form of knowing and the importance of storytelling to keeping the past alive. When Mama asks Anna if she remembers the voyage from Italy, Bryant establishes Anna’s Americanness:

I shake my head. ‘I wasn’t born yet, Mama.’

She shakes her head and smiles at her mistake. ‘No, no, you were born here. That is right.’ She closes her eyes, but she is not asleep. Only resting.

In a moment she opens them again to tell me about the land I never saw. The Old Country, fixed forever in radiant panorama. How green the foothill meadows, how sweet the oranges, how golden the sunrise as they walk to the factories set in the fields of her grandfathers. (4)

Like the dreams, the past is hidden without the storytelling to give it shape. In the novel’s earliest scenes, then, the implied author sets up the importance of dreams and stories, connects them to ethnicity, and establishes that Anna will re-learn about her past and present life through the lens of the dream stories. The implied author re-enforces the reliability of the stories presented in Anna’s dreams and reveries by presenting confirmation of the information in a
subsequent section, as when Anna’s sister shows up in the hospital after Anna’s dreams of her mother, father, and early family life with siblings (14). At the same time, the authorial audience also versed in the literary conventions that Bryant uses will read Anna’s reaction to the memories with skepticism and reserve because of her unreliability.

Just as deVries does in *Tender Warriors*, Bryant immediately establishes Anna’s lack of memory as the focus of the narrative. Similar to Sonny’s unreliability, Anna’s unreliability lies on Phelan’s axis of misreporting the characters, facts and events. The trauma of the event in front of Camino Real High School has inhibited Anna’s ability to know what happened. Bryant’s implied author raises several possibilities for what happened—a heart attack, a fall, or a mugging—though there is evidence for none of these events. In this first scene, the readers are encouraged to suspend and reserve judgment. Although the ethnic implied author does not reveal to the reader more than Anna knows, as in *Tender Warriors*, the effect of the lack of memory raises skepticism in the reader. When Anna remembers nothing about the night in question, the reader “determines that a narrator’s words can’t be taken at face value” as Phelan claims (50-51). As the narrative progresses and Anna searches for reliable memories, the authorial audience reserves judgment and must evaluate the potential unreliability of all of Anna’s memories. Bona claims that Anna’s goal is to “reconnect the self to the past in order to move into a healthy and rewarding adulthood” and that “the movement into memory is necessary, painful and illuminating” (*Claiming* 96). The dreams also conjure people or letters from people who later appear and reconnect with Anna.

Because of the skepticism about Anna’s memory, the authorial reader will weigh the dream story against the waking character reality. Anna often engages in the same process and, as Vanessa will do in *Ghost Dance*, raises the questions about the unreliability of her own
memories which eventually forces her to re-evaluate their significance. For example, every day she has a dream about a fire at the high school that develops more fully with each night’s sleep. The repetition of this dream and Anna’s continuing reactions to it signal the moments where the reader and the implied author commune in their skepticism. The audience reads Anna’s reactions as a deviation from the novel’s discourse which advocates for a new understanding, beyond remembering, of what has taken place. The fire dream shakes Anna’s confidence in her memories:

...occasionally she dropped deeper and deeper into her sleep, and whenever she did, she found herself watching a fire. She stood in front of it, a great fire. It burned and burned, but she could not tell what was burning. She rose to half-awake dozing, then fell back into fire-watching sleep. Each time she half-woke she asked herself, what’s burning? She could see nothing but flames. (9)

Unlike the other dream sequences which provide memories, the text of the fire dreams is not italicized, and the dream images are depicted more impressionistically than the sequential narratives of the memory dreams. Each night the images are repeated, and reveal that it is Camino Real High School which is burning in the fire. Anna receives a little more information with each dream but it remains unclear to the reader and to Anna watching whether the dreams address her past or future. Freud postulates that “even if we conclude that every dream has a meaning and a psychic value, we must nevertheless allow for the possibility that this meaning may not be the same in every dream.” He also outlines the possibilities for different meanings: “the fulfillment of a wish; another may turn out to be the realization of an apprehension; a third may have a reflection as its content, a fourth may simply reproduce a reminiscence” (34). In other words, while there is only interpretation, there are many interpretations. The novel
replays the dream and suggests changing meanings in the repetitive combination of images. Even the traditional interpretation of a burning school is of mixed portent. According to a traditional dream interpretation book:16 “Fire is favorable to the dreamer if he does not get burned” and signifies continued prosperity, while dreaming of a school you attended “portends that discontent and discouraging incidents overshadows the present” (Miller 237, 497). Within the novel, the dream gives clues to interpreting the larger themes of Anna’s spiritual struggle in addition to the suppressed details of the night she is driven to recall.

Unlike Sonny or Vanessa, Anna does demonstrate the ability to read or interpret on Phelan’s axis of “knowledge and perception.” She actively pursues her dreams and puts great value in the information that she receives during her sleeping hours. Each night, after she has exhausted conscious ways of trying to remember, she goes to sleep purposefully in hope that she will again have the fire dream:

She closed her eyes, waiting for the sleep that would bring her more dreams. Dreams would give her the answers. She had picked up hints, shadows or memories from them before, like her recognition of Maria. And it seemed now more important than ever that she recover all her memory. All of it, even the part she felt afraid to remember.

It was only toward morning that she found her way back to her dream. This time she took careful note of all its parts: the building, the recognizable people on the roof, the flames shooting out of the dark windows. (108)

Although for the first part of the novel, Anna may, in Phelan’s terms, “underread” the information that the dreams have given her, she reveals that she has the skills and abilities to interpret the ethnic form of the dream narrative—skills which she attributes to her mother’s
superstitions (5,15). Further, Bona writes that Anna “replace[s] the religious superstitions and old world faith of her mother with the rational atmosphere of the library and the scholar” (Claiming 116). As the novel progresses, the implied author strengthens Anna’s reliability through her approach to dreams. As she recovers from the initial trauma of the alleged attack, she consciously looks for the answers in her dream, but then also studies them analytically by taking “careful note of all its parts,” like the English teacher she is. The narrative reveals itself bit by bit to Anna at the same time as it does to the reader. While she knows to use these abilities when her waking memory fails, she also has an American education, unlike her mother, and as she becomes stronger in the later part of the novel, she is able to supplement the old superstitious ways with knowledge learned from her cognitive psychology textbooks and mystery novels. Bryant writes:

She wondered if when she fell asleep tonight her dream would complete the story for her finally giving her the total memory. She doubted it. Dreams were useful when they moved ahead of consciousness, but her conscious mind had now moved ahead of her dreams. Hints and symbols would not connect with total conscious memory. Trying to remember only sealed tight the door between her and the facts she knew but did not know. The right lever, tripped, would open the door, But where was that lever? She laughed. The return to the scene of the crime. Wasn’t that what all the old detective stories did? (138-139).

Anna combines the old world knowledge of dreams with her training as a thinker to construct a hybrid Italian and American approach to interpreting her dreams—one that finally works to unlock the details of what happened that first night in front of Camino Real High School. In the end, she remembers that she went there that night to burn down the school building.
As Anna “underreads” her dreams for much of the novel, she also “underregards” her lack of memory for a significant amount of the narrative. On Phelan’s axis of “ethics and evaluation”: “Underregarding occurs when a narrator’s ethical judgment is moving along on the right track but simply does not go far enough” (52). In other words, in Anna’s focusing all her effort on recalling the details of the night in front of the school, she undervalues the deeper significance of the event, at least until she recalls what happened. From the beginning she ignores her intuitive feelings of dread that occur when she thinks about the night (25). As Anna moves from underregarding to a more reliable process of evaluating the details, Anna is forced by her returning memory to reevaluate not only the old memories and the events of the night at the school, but the significance of her life’s work. As Zandy has written, “Any reliable reading of Miss Giardino must pause over what it means to believe in the value of being a teacher and then to have that belief shaken” (166). The unreliability in Miss Giardino is entirely focused on the “dissimulation and reticence” of what Anna was doing at the school the night she was knocked unconscious. The narrative suppresses that she went to the school to burn it down and masks her actions with the stereotypical assumptions that the old, retired, school teacher must have been a mugging victim when actually she was the predator. Through the process of using an unreliable narrator, Bryant does “achiev[e] a transvaluation of stated negative values and implied positive ones” (Riggan 176). Specifically, the matrix of unreliable narration forces a confrontation with the established truths—in this case, the myths and rhetoric surrounding the American education system. As Tender Warriors compels a reconsideration of the patriarchal family structure, in Miss Giardino, Bryant forces Anna and the audience to re-evaluate the role that public schools and teachers play in keeping ethnic Americans in a subordinate place within the system—even especially “good” teachers like Anna Giardino.
When Anna recovers the memory of her attempt to burn the high school down, it is nearly anti-climatic. In an earlier moment of crisis, she remembers an argument with ex-lover and current downstairs neighbor Arno. He is set up throughout the novel as an intellectual-socialist who is privileged by family wealth that sustains a lifetime of his irresponsibility. Despite being a bourgeois foil to Anna’s immigrant identity, he contextualizes everything in socio-political terms during his discussions with Anna. In what is arguably the climactic identity crisis for Anna, he reminds her of an argument they had. Like the details of the night in front of Camino Real, she has also forgotten the argument. Arno says, “Oh you were going into your usual thing on standards and grades and education being the key to upward mobility. ... And I told you it was a comfortable fiction, a way to keep the poor in their place. The few who rose proved the point, held out hope, but the whole thing was dependent on just a few making it” (111). That Anna doesn’t remember this argument is another instance of her unreliability that appears in the last third of the novel. At first she denies that they have had the disagreement. Phelan’s suggestion that denial is a form of acknowledging awareness of the truth applies in this instance. After Arno reminds her of the argument, Anna is able to remember her reaction: “If he is right, then I made a terrible mistake, turned the wrong way, made my whole life, my life’s work, a detour. By trying to save a few.” In the present, she acknowledges the effect Arno’s socio-political points had on her and tells him, “You had taken my whole life, everything I struggled to do, and told me it was worthless” (112). Her feeling of failure is intensified by her identity as an ethnic teacher of ethnic students. As an ethnic student who had found success in the education system, she thought of herself as a role model for other ethnic students. Arno’s words, however, force her to consider that she may have been a pawn in a corrupt system. Instead of helping the few students who found success at the high
school, Arno suggests that Anna has been enabling a system that exploits most ethnic
students—a realization which reconnects her to her father’s struggle and failure.

Bryant plants overt clues that Anna has been re-evaluating her life’s work as a teacher
in the memories that resurface even before she recalls the night of the attempted arson. She
hasn’t touched the books and teaching materials that take up all the space in her apartment
since she retired several years ago. She recalls trying to leave the curricular material for other
teachers: “‘This represents a lifetime of work,’ I tell him. ‘Someone must be able to find
something here of use to...’ The bland, nodding face confronts me like a stone, a blank denial.
It is a life’s work and no one wants it anymore, just as they don’t want me anymore” (64). The
school system replaces teachers and theories as often as it addresses new waves of immigrants,
and continually re-invents the wheel without improving the system for students or educators.
As successful as Anna is as an English teacher, she and her teaching materials are obsolete in a
hierarchical system that relies on a certain percentage of failure.

Another clue to Anna’s impending tantrum is the repeated emphasis on the waves of
ethnicity that the memories conjure for her and that are confirmed in contact with former
students turned educators like Maria Flores and Willie Fortuna. In Maria Flores, a Mexican
American, Anna recognizes her own similar struggles as an exceptionally successful ethnic
student who is held up as an example for the other students (87-93). Willie Fortuna, the Italian
American football player, is coddled and passed along first as a student and then as a teacher at
a time when the wave of Italian immigrants was reaching its peak in the neighborhood (70-78).
Because he is continually passed along, he is unqualified to do the work expected of him, but
he rises up through the public school administration when the system tries to hide his
incompetence. First as football coach, then counselor, then principal of Camino Real High
School, he does terrible damage to the school and students at every level due to his neglect and corruption (78).

Finally, in Booker T. Henderson, the student who had the potential to succeed as Anna and Maria have, Bryant presents an example of the student who falls through the cracks. Anna is forced to reconsider what the system does to African Americans— despite Anna’s efforts and Booker’s mother’s encouragement, the boy is allowed to drop out. Failed by the system, he meets up with Anna in front of Camino Real High School and thwarts her attempt to light the school on fire. As a symbol of the social philosophy embodied in his name and Anna’s feelings of disillusionment and failure, Anna angrily beats and kicks him. When Booker defends himself against her violence and pushes her away, Anna falls, the result of which is her loss of memory. She explains to Arno:

“It wasn’t that I was angry because he tried to rob me. I wasn’t thinking of that. It was because I recognized him. It was because I hated him so. Or not really him. He was everything I hated, everything about the school, about my life, everything I hated was... Booker. I hated him the way he hated me when I was his teacher.” (143)

She links her rage at Booker to the rage that she feels for the school system:

It was the institution itself, the conditions, The System, as Arno always put it, that was to blame. Not her or the students or even the teachers she most despised. To remove, to obliterate one structure of that system seemed like the only way to force a change. Logical. It still seemed logical in a crazy sort of way. (144)
The rage she feels for Booker and the school she eventually connects to her father’s rage that she witnessed as a child and young adult. As an immigrant laborer beaten down by the mines which infected his lungs, Anna’s father took out his frustration on his family—driving away his daughters and wearing down his wife. The implied author re-instates Anna’s reliability through the full recovery of her memory. With this newly established reliability, Bryant writes Anna’s thoughts about her father:

> He had endured the horrible wrench of the emigrant, out of misery to desperate hope. But all hope had been eroded away until only desperation was left.

> And how had she differed from her father? At first she had hated him; then she forgot him. Now, finally, she understood him. She had learned to understand him by becoming him. He had a vision of a better life and had strained himself to the utmost to go after it. So had she. He had become filled with hatred and bitterness and despair, and had vented his hatred on the nearest targets. So, finally, had she. (145-146)

With Anna’s reliability restored, the didactic narrative removes the signals to treat Anna’s description with skepticism. Ultimately, Anna equates her work as a teacher in the school system with her father’s experience as alienated labor in the mines and on the farm. Although she achieved some material comfort through her teaching career, in the end, she identifies her personal sacrifices and failure to better the Mission neighborhood with her father’s rage at his sacrifices and failure. In the process of losing and reconstructing her memory through the matrix of unreliability, Anna and the audience reconsider the myth that education is a simple path to social mobility. Bryant’s *Miss Giardino* exposes the complicated relationship between the sacrifices and exploitation that schools require of ethnic students and teachers in
minoritized spaces such as the Mission neighborhood. The dream narratives have undermined the story Anna has been telling herself about her place in the world, and the novel ends with Anna in transition. She sells her house and her books to clear the story space, and Bryant leaves Anna’s next move unwritten. She is liberated to write her own last chapter.

E. *GHOST DANCE: VANESSA*

Like *Tender Warriors*, Carole Maso’s *Ghost Dance* also centers on a fractured family and the death of the mother. Christine Wing Turin, a famous poet, is killed instantly when a car crashes into her Ford Pinto. As Anna does in *Miss Giardino*, Vanessa Turin, Christine’s daughter, struggles alone most of the novel remembering, dreaming and inventing stories about her parents and her parents’ parents. She struggles to piece together the family and make sense of the losses. In the novel’s present time, she is living in New York City on the royalties from her mother’s books. She has dropped out of Vassar and her brother Fletcher has disappeared into his underground work as a civil rights activist. Vanessa’s Italian American father, Michael, is also lost—physically he’s been away at sea since Christine’s death—and through Vanessa’s stories we realize he was often emotionally absent from her childhood. The mother’s death has scattered the family and Vanessa seems to spend most of her time shooting heroin and unsuccessfully trying to forget the past. Much of Maso’s narrative depicts drug-induced memories, dreams, and hallucinations. It is finally through Vanessa’s hallucinated lover called Jack that she locates Fletcher. United, the siblings perform the ghost dance taught to them by Angelo, their paternal grandfather. Through the ritual they are finally able to say good-bye to their mother Christine.
Maso writes in the context of post-modernism and experiments with narrative structures and conventions. *Ghost Dance* is narrated almost entirely by Vanessa, and, like *Tender Warriors* and *Miss Giardino*, it is filled with competing versions of stories, inventions, memories and dreams. The taxonomy of the narrative structure defies easy description but unlike deVries’s independent voices or Bryant’s self-interviews, Maso’s project uncovers layer after layer of story. The novel breaks from a linear plot structure and emphasizes storytelling. In the opening section, Vanessa moves from a story about meeting her mother at Grand Central Station (5-10), to a childhood conversation about the Topaz Bird (10-12), to the genealogy of mental illness in the family (12-16), to a memory of her childhood house (16-17) to a dream of an exaggerated anonymous lover (18) to the televised wedding of Grace Kelly which Vanessa imagines her father watching the night he meets Christine (18-20). Moving back and forth in time, switching from location to location, Maso peels through layers of memory, generations of family, national history, geography, film culture, and even math discourse, as Vanessa tries to understand what has come to pass and what has been lost. The scope of *Ghost Dance* is much larger than *Tender Warriors* or *Miss Giardino*, and Maso intertwines three generations of family history with Vanessa’s troubled first year at college. The immigration stories of her two grandfathers combine with references to the Kennedy assassination, the World’s Fair, and several activist events, as Vanessa describes an intense college romance, a developing heroin habit, and a childhood with a famous but mentally ill mother. Fred Gardaphe explains that Maso’s structure “mirrors the uncertainty and incoherence inside Vanessa as she attempts to build an identity out of the fragments of history and myth she picks up from her family” (*Italian* 142). Vanessa’s reliability is a question throughout the entire novel and although the authorial audience will pick up clues to Maso’s “dissimulation and reticence,” the implied
author of *Ghost Dance* is much less direct than the implied authors of *Tender Warriors* or *Miss Giardino*.

*Ghost Dance* uses non-linearity along with the symbolic modes of knowledge and fragmentation. The novel shares these characteristics with *Tender Warriors* and *Miss Giardino*, and all three novels link to the tradition of feminist experimental writing in the use of these elements. Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs have written that disrupting the conventional narrative with forms that are non-linear, polyphonic, open-ended and which utilize oral and ancient systems of knowledge “not only assail the social structure, but also produce an alternative fictional space, a space in which the feminine, marginalized in traditional fiction and patriarchal culture, can be expressed” (4). The skepticism raised by the narration in each novel coincides with each writer’s casting an alternative to the dominant masculine authority that organizes information in linear, argumentative, decisive, and logically structured order. The implied author of *Ghost Dance* breaks the text repeatedly on each page with white space and lines, inserted quotes from other historical texts or poems, and word for word reprints of previous sections of the novel. The repeated use of phrases like “I can imagine my father” (21), “We always knew the truth was useless” (57), “In the world we try to make together” (67), or “When I go to Paterson in my head” (69) all call attention to Vanessa’s storytelling and echo an orality which in Ong’s terms also challenges the dominant written authority so often associated with patriarchal hegemony.

The opening of Maso’s book sets Vanessa up for a failure of sorts that enforces a feminist view of alternative knowledge. Maso writes:

“On such a day as this it is possible to believe that everything will be fine. We will understand our lives. We will be brave. We will say what we meant to say.
... On such a day it is possible to believe that sorrow will turn into one great vapor and blow off and be gone forever” (12).

Vanessa never achieves that clarity of understanding and that day never comes to pass. She approaches Christine and “The vision breaks.” Maso writes, “My mother is in deep trouble” (7). Christine cannot function in the logically ordered patriarchal world and the novel raises doubt about whether Vanessa can either. As Sonny and Anna do in deVries’ and Bryant’s works, Vanessa navigates through the novel questioning the assumptions of systemic authority and all it represents. Ghost Dance’s focus is much larger and less targeted than Tender Warriors or Miss Giardino. Instead of addressing the traditional family structure or the school system, Maso argues for a general wariness about anything that claims to be the absolute truth. Everything should be questioned, everything investigated, and each story changes the other stories. Vanessa’s grief over the loss of Christine, a loss that begins even before she dies in a car crash, is bound up with her desire to understand the world. But there is much missing from what Vanessa knows about her mother and her family. What she doesn’t know, she invents or dreams.

On Phelan’s axes, Vanessa’s unreliability shifts to different points and intensifies to varied degrees throughout the novel. Phelan writes that “a given narrator can be unreliable in different ways at different points in his or her own narration” (52). As the narrative progresses, the audience is given clues to what may or may not be reliable information and in the implied author’s repetition, the reader constructs a body of knowledge that shifts and changes with each addition, elaboration or retelling. Over time, the reader comprehends or intuits what points Vanessa misreports, misreads and misregards, but the novel offers no overt confirmation as Tender Warriors or Miss Giardino does. As in the other two novels, Ghost Dance’s implied
author constantly references dreams—sleep dreams, waking reveries, daydreamt memories of the past, as well as drug induced hallucinations and even those types of aspirations that drive the immigrants, dreams of a better life.

As Riggan claims, “[W]ords often lie; that which goes unsaid is frequently seen to be as significant as that which is said; and truth is seen as not being the exclusive property of a direct, sincere, seemingly omniscient voice...” (182). Vanessa misreports Christine’s death indirectly at first. She does not declare outright that her mother is still alive as Sonny does, but the implied author’s dissimulative strategy utilizes ambiguous language. Often in Vanessa’s point of view, Maso will write misleading things like “the last time I saw my mother” (41), “She is so far away” (12), or “In my house she is always there next to me” (17). Often the present tense form of the verb masks a past memory and suggests that the scene is happening in the present. These shifts in tense may indicate the dream state of Vanessa’s memories, where she relives the past events in dream form as though they are actually occurring. At times, Vanessa addresses her mother directly as though she has just gone away temporarily: “After you left, Dad left, and after Dad, Fletcher too. I never thought this would happen to us, that we would end up like this: hundreds of thousands of miles apart, flung like fish across the water, scattered like ashes” (31). Other times, she describes her efforts to find her mother: “I go to Grand Central Station looking for my mother who has quite simply disappeared off the face of the earth” (66). In these contradictory moments, the implied author clearly signals that Vanessa is in crisis and that readers must scrutinize what she reports.

As deVries does with Sonny in Tender Warriors, Maso also represents Vanessa’s certainty that Christine is alive and will return: Vanessa writes letters to her brother Fletcher asking, “When do you think Mom is coming home?” and has phoned Sabine and Aunt Lucy to
ask “Where did Mom go?” (66). But in Part Five, Maso finally reveals that Christine has died in a car accident just shortly after Vanessa meets her mother in Grand Central Station in the incident which opens the book. Throughout the four preceding sections of the novel, Vanessa has no memory of the wake and funeral described in Part Five. Sometimes Vanessa misreports and sometimes she underreports depending on how she is coping with her grief at that particular moment. Her mother is dead from the car crash. That the narrative withholds and/or misrepresents this information creates skepticism about all of Vanessa’s previous stories and reinforces the novel’s overarching critique of the systems of knowledge, history, and culture.

Maso’s representation of dreams is much more sophisticated than those rendered by deVries or Bryant, but as in the two previous novels, dreams are directly linked to ethnicity. Arguably, the ability to read dreams is a form of ethnic knowledge learned in part from Angelo, Vanessa’s Italian American grandfather. After Angelo experiences injustice at the World’s Fair as a participant at an African American protest, he spends the last five years of his life learning the spiritual practices of Native Americans and then teaching the history and rituals to his grandchildren (129, 138). Bona observes that, “he replaces his Italian heritage with Native American beliefs” (Claiming 179). While Angelo rejected his own Italian language and culture as a new immigrant, he represents the ethnic knowledge of dreams and magic in his relationship to the Native and African Americans; and stands for a more generalized ethnic experience in America. He takes many bus trips to the Dakotas to learn, and is drawn there by his dreams: “I dreamed of you, of this place,” he tells the teacher, Two Bears (78). The implied author associates Angelo continually with sleep dreams and visions. He cultivates the knowledge of having and reading dreams; after sleeping most of the day he tells Vanessa, “‘I
had to finish my dream’” (90). He participates in a sweat lodge and teaches the children about the prophetic visions the Native Americans had about the white man (131, 134).

Although Vanessa’s drug use seems to obstruct her ability at times, she does display a natural sensitivity to supernatural ways; she reads the dreams of her family members while they sleep in the car (123), tries to talk to the spirits who haunt her house (59), and communicates with her grandfather years after his death (235). The audience must decide whether these are stories she tells herself, actual supernatural abilities, or the result of the heroin use. The implied author suggests multiple possibilities. In the middle of describing a dream of her grandmother, Vanessa talks to the sky and writes “I feel myself to be an ancient instrument upon which someone’s fingers play slow, sad music, hesitantly, careful not to touch the wrong note” (171).

Not only does she practice these magical ways of understanding, she acknowledges that they are alternative ways of knowing. She eventually uses this ethnic knowledge to conjure and interpret the drug-induced hallucinations of her mythologically imagined lover.²² It is through these sadomasochistic dreams of Jack that she finds her way to the lost brother. Vanessa misreads and underreads her memories and dreams throughout Ghost Dance, but ultimately she does perceive the information well enough to reconnect with Fletcher. Together, they perform the Native American rituals that Angelo has taught them (270-273). These ghost dance rituals are an ethnic performance which frees them from the hold Christine’s death has over them. The novel implies that Christine’s spirit has been held on earth and has been haunting the siblings while driving them to different courses of escape—Vanessa to drugs and Fletcher to seeking justice through activism against the Ford Corporation. The enactment of the ghost dance conjures not only a vision of the Topaz Bird, which has been an ambiguous symbol of Christine’s genius or mental illness, but a vision of Christine herself: “And I finally see it. I see
it perfectly. I do not turn from it and it does not fly away. ‘The Topaz Bird.’ We are nearly blinded by its brilliant, jewel-like light. And, finally, from the brilliant light she steps. Through the tall grass, she moves slowly to us. I am breathing light, and she is so beautiful and she is dressed in white” (272). Once again, the novel leaves it to the audience to decide if Vanessa is mentally ill, a “genius,” or both, like her mother Christine. Similar to the reunion of the DeMarcos or the recovery of Anna’s memory, the vision resulting from Vanessa and Fletcher’s ghost dance ritual eases the hold that the trauma and grief has had over them.25

In *Ghost Dance*, Maso also represents Vanessa’s interiority to provoke skepticism about Vanessa’s state of mind. In addition to the incessant repetition of the stories, the language and the lyricism, the excessive disjunction between her interior reactions and the surface incidents to which she is responding show that, like *Tender Warrior*’s Sonny, Vanessa’s interior life is filled with an intense emotionality consisting of myth, symbol and poetry that seems just a little out of place. In one early example, Vanessa responds to asking her father Michael if Christine will ever take her to France then responds elaborately. Maso writes:

> My father is far away. His silence is so deep and seductive that it seems he has had to travel a great distance to the surface to form even these few words. He does not buoy up to the surface like a swimmer or some other temporary guest of water... I would like to dredge him up from those depths, breathe my life into him, beach him on some even shore. I dive once, twice, hold his head in the air, push water from his lungs. (19)

Strands of birth, death and heroic myth tangle in her thoughts, but seem out of place next to his quotidian reply—he washes his soup bowl and asks “How about a movie?” (19). The stories that Vanessa tells herself have a performative quality and her reaction that imagines him
metaphorically in a deep body of water transforms the situation and gives her agency to reach out and save him, “hold his head in the air, push water from his lungs” (19). Over and over Maso intercuts the intensely lyrical interior thoughts of Vanessa with the seemingly ordinary situations that prompt them.

Vanessa’s search for memories of her family, either in dreams or story, is linked in the novel to gaps in the national memory that will also culminate in the ending visions of the ghost dance. That Maso opens the novel in Grand Central Station beneath the “great clock” invokes the progressive chronology that results in the facade of prosperity and innovation which propels much of the twentieth century American industry and culture to build such structures. According to *The Rough Guide* to New York City, over the years the terminal has taken on a “mythic significance” and as a main transportation artery through New York, remains a “symbolic gateway to an undiscovered continent,” the corporate dream of undeveloped commercial opportunity (Dunford 132). As Vanessa looks around the station, she imagines a permanence; Maso writes: “I step into the safety of this great station and the feeling persists: it will all last forever. The building curves around me; all longings merge here” (6). The ambiguous “it” that “will all last forever” could signify the physical building, the industrial society it represents, or the emotional “safety” that the station momentarily reflects to her. But this is undermined, because we quickly learn the fragility of the moment. Looking around, she sees the stories in the building and in the people standing around her to be sacrificed; she imagines that a man standing on the balcony is remembering how his parents waved him off to war. In these small moments even at the beginning, the personal—“his father’s hesitant pride, his mother’s tears”—is intertwined with the national—“war” (6).
Literally the layers of history and fabrication that Vanessa uncovers about Christine, Michael, and Angelo in her own family story are represented by Christine’s over dressing in the first scene and Vanessa’s attempt to remove “the layers and layers of clothes, sweater over silk blouse over sweater” (7). This moment is repeated several times in the novel and signals one of the many instances of how Vanessa misregards, in terms of “ethics and evaluation,” what she perceives by denying its importance. More often, the reader interprets Vanessa’s unreliability when Vanessa realizes the significance of the crisis but she does not help Christine effectively. At these moments she underregards her perceptions when she doesn’t take enough action. As Vanessa starts removing some of the accessories, she realizes that “hundreds of tiny gold chains encircle [Christine’s] ankles” and “It will not be fine,” but she leaves her mother alone in that grand hall of industry nevertheless (9). Later the implied author reveals that Vanessa is practiced at reading Christine’s moments of crisis, but as a child or a teenager does not have agency to take action (39, 218). The personal moments of crisis are linked to national moments of crisis where people are also left without recourse — the references to Native American exploitation and the Kennedy assassination stand in contrast to Fletcher’s activism against the Vietnam War and corporate greed. Maso links these layers of family story that have been erased or sacrificed or hidden to the gaps in the national story which are also masked or silenced. By recovering some of the voices, the novel suggests a defiance of a centralizing, dominant authority so often associated with patriarchal culture.

Maso grants agency to her protagonist in her own narration and thoughts, and like Sonny’s memories of resistance in *Tender Warriors*, Vanessa’s stories allow her to continue despite her grief and environment. However, the implied author raises questions about Vanessa’s self stories as well. Like her dreams, she is never certain. In one story Vanessa
describes in detail a Fourth of July holiday morning where she witnessed Grandma Maria dance the tarantula folk dance on the lawn of the nursing home and talked with her about her love of Italian songs, food and language. In Vanessa’s first person point of view, she tells how her grandmother and her father reconcile: “My father turned to us for what seemed the first time in his life and gestured for us to come forward and enter the circle he and his mother had made with their arms. We hugged each other, all four of us” (223). Vanessa’s story of healing and forgiveness is punctuated by a celebration of folk dancing. Later, however, when Vanessa reminds Fletcher of the day, he tells her “‘Grandma never did that’” (248). The story functions to help Vanessa, but the narrative raises doubts about the reality of the event and the reader retains skepticism about the family’s moment of reunion, except as perhaps Vanessa’s subconscious wish. Whether influenced by drugs, dreams, or faulty memories, Vanessa continually narrates stories to herself throughout the novel and, like Bryant’s Anna Giardino, recovers her own version of personal history through imagination or recall. Just as Sonny needs to subvert Dominic’s authority in Tender Warriors or Anna needs to burn down the school in Miss Giardino, Vanessa’s interior narratives undermine the importance of her family’s authority while enacting a possibility for a deeper connection. On a larger level, the stories of Vanessa’s family, especially the ones which recover forgotten or erased experiences in American history—Angelo’s alliance with Native American tribal culture, Maria’s or her maternal grandfather’s unhappy cultural assimilations, the civil rights protest in the middle of a clichéd and commercialized World’s Fair history exhibit—undermine the official narratives of American history.

As in Tender Warriors or Miss Giardino, the implied author follows up the opening clues that Vanessa’s grief, drug use, genetic inheritance, or desire has interfered with how she
perceives the world and tells the story. In part because of Vanessa’s unreliability and in part because of the rituals, dreams and magic that construct the uncertainty of Vanessa’s stories—the Topaz Bird, Fletcher’s cross-country trip, Maria’s dance on the lawn, the disappearance of Michael, Angelo’s ghost dance lessons, and Jack’s mythic sexual encounters—much of what happens in *Ghost Dance* is arguably open for interpretation. The ghost dance ritual performed by Vanessa and Fletcher results in not only a vision of Christine, but also two pages of tragic events from history interspersed with smaller tragic events from the Wing-Turin family history. Bona argues that “Vanessa learns to contextualize her mother’s loss, placing her in American history alongside other tragic occurrences: the death of a Vietnam veteran, the mutilation of a factory worker, the assassinations of President Lincoln and Martin Luther King, the death by starvation of a child in the Bronx” (182). In the ghost dance litany that ends the novel, Vanessa’s letting go of her mother is once again bound together with the call for a revision of the national story. Maso’s implied author explains:

> We live in the past and we live in the present. Let us live in those who wanted only to have a normal lifetime but for whom it was not possible... Let us live in the mouths of the men who lie, who deny and deny and deny, who cover up their crimes. Let us change the shape of each word they speak. (274)

While Vanessa does not acknowledge her own unreliability as a narrator, Maso calls on readers to acknowledge the unreliability of the men who “lie,” “deny,” and “cover up.” Like *Tender Warriors* and *Miss Giardino*, *Ghost Dance* ends ambiguously with the intersection of recovered knowledge and a spiritual communion with a family member that suggests hope and release.

F. CONCLUSION
None of these three novels offer certainty in their endings. DeVries’ *Tender Warriors*, Bryant’s *Miss Giardino*, and Maso’s *Ghost Dance* all encourage skepticism about the stories that unfold, and by doing so interrogate how stories function to construct history—whether it is personal history, family history, cultural history or national history. Through fragmented and multiple perspectives, through dreams, and through memories, these writers add to the rich tradition of novels that are simultaneously of and about story.

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1 Discourse is a complex term with many connotations, but several variations of its usage will apply satisfactorily depending on the critical argument. The implied author certainly utilizes discourse on the narratological understanding of generic systems of writing. At the same time, ideological definitions of discourse that embody post-structuralist ideas about power relations also apply to the work of the implied author. See Keen (51-52) for more discussion about discourse’s relation to the implied author.

2 Phelan disagrees sharply with Nunning on several points, but agrees with these ideas about what the audience brings to the interpretation of unreliable narrators. See Phelan (42-45) for more on Nunning’s critique of Booth.

3 I use the phrase “ethnic implied author” to emphasize an implied author that uses ethnicity and ethnic forms as an integral component of the novel’s discourse.

4 For more on the teaching of novels by ethnic writers as sociological texts, see my Chapter Seven.

5 Critics have discussed the unreliable narrators in numerous classic novels including texts as diverse as *Moll Flanders*, *The Odyssey*, *Lolita*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Auggie March*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Tin Drum*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *Huckleberry Finn*.

6 Riggan’s categories include the Picaro, the Clown, the Madman, and the Naif. While Anna, Sonny and Vanessa may show signs of several characteristics that link them to some of these categories, none of Riggan’s classifications describe the traumatized lack of memory depicted by Bryant, deVries and Maso.
Phelan defines authorial audience as “The hypothetical ideal audience for whom the implied author constructs the text and who understands it perfectly.” Further, the authorial audience “operates with the tacit knowledge that the characters and events are synthetic constructs rather than real people and historical happenings” (213). Applied to an ethnic implied author, the authorial audience for an ethnic novel would not only be able to comprehend the cultural codes and ethnic forms used in the text, but also would know the fictional nature of the narrative may take poetic license with characters, history, and events. With these three novels that utilize dream sequences, the authorial audience suspends belief in support of the fictional experience. See also Keen (131).

Barolini’s *The Dream Book* takes its title from an “old, yellowed, linoleum-covered manual” written by Italian immigrant women who lived in a mining town in Colorado, and analyzed the symbols and stories of their dreams using this handwritten book. Barolini writes, “It was, Alma told me, a book the Italian women of Telluride used constantly, the Baedeker of their dreams. For each dream could be interpreted by consulting meanings in the alphabetized subject entries, and looking up dreams gave them explication for the strangeness around them and a clue to their destino” (xii).

St. Lucy is a Sicilian Saint who died in 304 A.D. She died a virgin and a martyr, and was killed by sword for refusing to marry. Legendary stories tell that unable to violate her or burn her, her punishers tore out her eyes with a fork but they were miraculously restored. Since medieval times, she has been represented holding a plate with her severed eyes. Her feast day is celebrated on the shortest day of the year, December 13, with a festival of lights (Farmer 311-312).

For more on Italian Americans’ relationships with gravesites see Williams, Zaloha, and Matturi.

As a photographer, Rose’s photos reinforce the importance of looking and seeing, fogginess and clarity. The eye imagery in Rose’s photos connects to the repeated Saint Lucia references, Josephine’s favorite, to whom Rose prays. DeVries writes of one of Rose’s photos: “Recently she’d gone up to Lake Ontario, and in the very early morning she took what she thought might be the best of the lot—maybe even the conclusion to the sequence—the heavy, gray mist burning off, the fog just lifting to reveal a strip of incredible blue, just a sliver of it, shaped like an almond, or an eye slowly opening” (24).

Bona offers a different reading of Dominic and meatballs. She writes: “On her own journey to locate her brother, Rose returns to the parental home where she and her father eat fusilli and meatballs, feeling ‘as though the meal had given them back something familiar’ (160)” (172). Instead of the stepping back into harsh rule of Dominic’s authority, Bona argues that “Rose’s response to sharing a meal with her father recalls a sense of comfort when Josephine, the undisputed center of the family, was alive” (172). Both ways of reading connect Dominic back to Josephine, for Rose as well as Sonny.
Although there is an absence of studies that focus specifically on the importance of dream interpretation in Italian American culture, many folklore studies on mal occhio address the way dream imagery can provide warnings and clues to deal with destructive forces or potential threats. See also Hand, Casetta and Thiederman, Di Stasi, Williams, Malpezzi & Clements, Vecoli, and Zaloha.

People dream in every language, across every country, culture, and nation, across every gender, race, class, and ethnicity. Like death, dreaming is a universal experience; however, it is also one of the most personal. Bert O. States writes: “Still, everyone dreams, and dreams are virtually pure instances of narrative creation unfettered by the demands of literary traditions or intelligibility, There is a naivete about dreams: they are marvelously aloof from the tendentious; they go about their business without advertisement for responsibility as if they were a perfectly adequate equivalent of life in the waking world. Dreams, one might say, constitute a private literature of the self, and it seems that if nothing else, they might tell us something about the nature of our ‘public’ literature” (4).

Gustavus Hindman Miller classifies three types of “pure” dreams: subjective, physical and spiritual. Subjective dreams are determined by the past, like the dreams Anna has which provide her with information about her childhood, education and past experiences with friends, family and lovers. Physical dreams are of the body. A spiritual dream, Miller explains, comes during deep sleep, is “always deeply prophetic, especially when it leaves a vivid impression of the conscious mind,” and is “brought about by the higher self penetrating the soul realm and reflecting upon the waking mind...” (20,21).

10,000 Dreams Interpreted or What’s in a Dream: A Scientific and Practical Exposition was written over 100 years ago by Gustavus Hindman Miller and has been available continuously. Over the years it has undergone over twenty updates and new editions.

Zandy quotes Bryant as commenting that class position is more important, and that she “do[es]n’t think that the ethnicity of Anna is essential to the story” (166). I disagree. The intensity of her betrayal and feeling of failure results from her subject position of being ethnic and being held as a token example of ethnic success.

Bona reads Anna’s description of her rage as “a form of madness” resulting from “the accumulation of injury and frustration, ignorance and fear, from so many young people” over her years of teaching. Bona writes that “Such a recognition further allows Anna to reestablish her identity with her familial past, without which she will die” (122). This recognition of her own madness, leads her to reconsider the “same exchange of fury” she saw her students display and connect it to the anger and destruction she witnessed in her father’s behavior. As an alternate reading of this scene, Bona provides another way of reading Anna’s unreliability and traumatic loss of memory while connecting the ethnic experiences of Italian Americans, African Americans, and Mexican Americans.

Zandy writes: “[Anna’s] father is destroyed by work—first the mines, then the failed farm—and by the knowlege that despite all his efforts to make a better life in America, of
selling his labor cheaply, he ultimately failed. What is hidden in the narrative — and muted in the American rhetoric of upward mobility and success — is why he failed, that is, a clarity about the forces that crushed him” (165-166).

20 The Ford Pinto became a symbol of the danger resulting from the corporate drive for profits at the expense of safety. Maso references many details that correspond to a real fire and death resulting from a rear end collision of a Pinto in 1973. See also Birsch and Fielder.

21 In her essay, “Notes of a Lyric Artist Working in Prose,” Maso writes about her novels: “And that the formal patterns not constrict. Ephemeral, imperfect, stories without their old authority. ‘Notebooks’ maybe ‘rather than masterpieces’” (39).

22 DeSalvo reads Jack as Vanessa’s real flesh and blood lover (149) while I read him as an invention.

23 For more information of the historical context of the Ghost Dance and the massacre at Wounded Knee see Brown.

24 Williams outlines several examples of how Italian Americans responded to the deaths of individuals whose lives were cut short suddenly due to violence or suicide and whose “ghost[s] w[ere]condemned to appear at the place where the death occurred until the assigned time had passed” (199). While Maso does not link Christine’s death to Italian American ethnic beliefs in haunting, her suggestions about ghosts and hauntings throughout the novel do coincide with documented beliefs and practices found among Italian American immigrants during the first part of the last century. See also Zaloha and Hand.

25 The ghost dance, as well as the preparations for Angelo’s death, described by Maso have some similarities to the Italian rituals described by Williams for freeing souls that linger after a sudden death; for example an open window encouraged a departed soul to both visit and finally take leave of its home. See Williams, Hand and Zaloha for more.

26 Clayton writes, again referencing deCerteau’s four ways that stories help people to “escape disciplinary control,” that narrative “enacts as well as means. Just as the ritual process can have a transformative effect on its participants, so stories can change the person who becomes caught up in their charms” (98). Bona concurs, linking Vanessa’s storytelling to loss: “Vanessa’s belief in the healing capacity of storytelling, which the Topaz Bird symbolizes, will help her uncover the reasons for her mother’s suffering and her father’s deep-boned silence” (175).

27 Louise DeSalvo offers a completely oppositional reading of storytelling in Ghost Dance. She argues that Vanessa’s imagination encouraged as it is by Christine leaves her ill-equipped to “recognize when she is hurt, to give her pain the attention that it deserves” (148) and that “[t]here are limits to the curative potential of pretense” (148).
For example DeSalvo reads Michael as an abusive father who sexually molests Vanessa (150), while Gardaphe reads him sinisterly as emotionally absent because he is “terrified” by the loss of his Italian ethnicity (143) and Bona concurs stating that Michael suffers from his parents’ “deliberate suppression of italianita” which causes his remoteness and his “rare but highly emotive responses to things Italian” (177-178). That multiple readings are possible may actually be evidence that Maso’s decision to create skepticism about Vanessa’s reliability accomplishes her subversive goal. There is no one authoritative reading.
Embedded dreams undermine official narratives by recovering memory in texts like *Tender Warriors, Miss Giardino, and Ghost Dance*. With the return to memory, the characters revise stories to enlarge the context and to fill in the gaps of the narrative. In other novels, writers like Mario Puzo, bestow their characters with control of the narrative more directly by casting them as writers and editors. Puzo’s use of frames in *Fools Die* and *The Sicilian* focuses on the role of the writer to complicate the relationship between oral storyteller and literary author.

In 1993 when Gay Talese published his infamous “Where are the Italian-American Novelists?” on the March 14th front page of *The New York Times Book Review*, Mario Puzo had been enjoying the spotlight of success for nearly twenty-five years. As Gay Talese points out, Mario Puzo is the one Italian American author known to most of the world’s readers.

make Puzo the best selling Italian American author. In fact by several accounts\(^1\) *The Godfather* is the one of the best selling books of the century with more than twenty-one million copies sold. While Talese’s article goes on to discuss the obstacles impeding Italian American authors, Puzo’s novels and indeed his entire career had been wrestling with issues of authorship. I argue that *Fools Die* (1978) and *The Sicilian* (1984), two of Puzo’s post-*Godfather* novels, are deeply immersed in a discussion of Italian American authorship that goes beyond the material and cultural levels discussed by Talese. In these novels, Puzo engages issues of authorship and audience that can be read back into *The Godfather* and Puzo’s career in general. Puzo crafts a complex narrative frame that privileges the issue of representation in each novel’s shifting relations among writers—their ambitions, intent, praxis and careers.

Near the end of *Fools Die*, writer John Merlyn narrates the aftermath of another writer’s death: “In the weeks [following his death] hundreds of thousands of words were written about Osano\(^2\) as the first great Italian literary figure in our cultural history. That would have given Osano a pain in the ass. He never thought of himself as Italian/American” (492). Framed by the fictional first pages of Osano’s last great American novel, Puzo’s *Fools Die* presents a critical portrait of authorship in New York’s literary scene and Hollywood’s film industry during the decades following World War II. Through characters like the long struggling writer John Merlyn, the celebrity Osano, and film directors Malomar and Janelle, Puzo dialectically engages what Donald Pease has called “the two contradictory impulses” of the author, “the genius who creates other ‘original’ worlds and the author who cooperates in the emergence of an alternative culture” (109). While Puzo strips the orphan Merlyn of a past ethnic history and allows him even to choose his own name, Puzo labels Osano as “Italian/American,” but only in the quote above after his death.\(^3\) Beyond a *kunstlerroman*, Merlyn’s writing combines with
Osano’s strong orality in the *mise en abyme* that Puzo uses to reflexively frame *Fools Die* to play with ideas of authorial power and identity. Pease writes: “the term ‘author’ raises questions about authority and whether the individual is the source or the effect of that authority” (106). In other words, for Pease the debate over authorship asks whether the writer claims the power to write the story or whether the powers that be (religious, royal, governmental, cultural) give the writer license to write the story—a kind of literary form of the question “Which comes first, the chicken or the egg.” When *Fools Die* is taken together with *The Sicilian*, Puzo’s discussion of authorship is extended directly to Italian American authority in his treatment of Turi Guiliano’s written Testament, the text-within-the-text authored by Guiliano and ferried to America by Michael Corleone whose appearances in the book loosely frame Guiliano’s story and bear witness to the Testament’s power.

**A. POST-GODFATHER CELEBRITY AND FOOLS DIE**

Given the popularity of *The Godfather* novel and movies, as well as the fanfare surrounding *Fools Die*’s record-setting paperback sales, Puzo’s cultural standing as the author of *The Godfather* overshadowed the initial publication of his subsequent novels even more prominently than his reputation may be understood today. Advertised as Puzo’s first novel since *The Godfather*, buyers expected something similar. The 531 pages of *Fools Die* can be broken down into three main narratives based on locales that overlap superficially, but tap into similar problems and themes. The first is the storyline that takes place in Las Vegas where Merlyn has gone in order to escape his family life and professional disappointments. The second part takes place mainly in New York and Long Island and shows Merlyn’s rise to financial success as a civilian army clerk, magazine writer, Osano’s assistant, and finally
novelist. The last section takes place in Hollywood where Merlyn has been hired to turn his best-selling novel into a screenplay. The scope of this chapter deals primarily with Merlyn in New York and his rise to becoming a successful author.4

By the time Mario Puzo finished writing *Fools Die* in 1978, his celebrity persona was well accessorized with a couple of Oscars for screenwriting, and just ripe for parody with thick black glasses and thicker cigars.5 The publicity for *Fools Die* takes advantage of Puzo’s playboy authorial image by including iconic photos of Puzo often in an overcoat with scarf, trademark glasses, and meaty fingers clenched around a half smoked cigar.

The decade of “good times” in Hollywood and Las Vegas that Puzo recounts in a June *Publishers Weekly* interview accents his image and reads like pure performance. Beneath the photo, the interview begins with a Puzo quote: “‘I want to write novels more than ever now, more than I ever wanted to write them before. For two reasons, I think. One, I’ve had a good time. I’ve written movies. I did all the things I wanted to. And second, I find that the only thing that really stands up, better than gambling, better than booze, better than women, is reading’” (Weyr 10). The interviewer capitalizes on the plot and characters of *Fools Die* by asking Puzo questions about his writing life. His answers swing widely between outrageous stereotypes and thoughtful reflection. In celebrity playboy mode Puzo states: “‘I can gamble for two days or for three days in Vegas,’ he continues. ‘I can do this or that. But when I settle down with five or six books it’s just the best thing there is,’” and later, “‘I’m at an age now where I think I know what I want. That doesn’t mean that a six-foot, tennis-playing Swedish blonde who can cook Chinese food won’t drag me away from a book’” (Weyr 10). In serious artist mode, he references Ruskin, *MacBeth*, and the “hard work” of writing: “‘I think it is a novelist’s job not to be a moralist but to make you care about the people in the book. You have to care about
characters and what happens to them, not love them. I detest novelists who give you characters you really despise and expect you to stick with them. I don’t believe in being judgmental”” (10). The flippant remarks about gambling, booze and women contrast with the serious comments about his philosophy of writing, and enact the conflicts over authorship that dominate *Fools Die*. Swinging from cavalier to serious, Puzo exudes witty confidence during this period and even targets screenwriting in the *Publishers Weekly* interview claiming: “‘The director can change your writing, an actor can. Even the script girl might. Sometimes a guy comes off the street and sounds like he’s making sense, and they’ll change the script for him’” (11). As he states in other places, in Puzo’s opinion, screenwriting is the lowest form of writing, because even the “guy …off the street” can challenge the writer’s authority. His desire to return to writing novels can be read as the desire to return to the autonomous control and authority that a novelist has and a screenwriter does not have.

Less than a week after the *Publishers Weekly* interview appeared and a month before the book was available in stores, *Fools Die* set a new record when the New American Library paid $2.2 million for its paperback rights in a deal that included $350,000 for the reprint rights to *The Godfather* (Radcliffe A1, Tebbel 378). With sales of *The Godfather* by most counts already reaching thirteen million copies, the August 28th issue of *Time* magazine featured another iconic cover illustration of Puzo and reported that he checked on the bidding in between tennis games (“Paperback”). The *Time* cover portrays Puzo in a 1970s white leisure suit looking a little like Brando overlooking a landscape of American literature. The title “The Godfather of the Paperback Boom” nefariously connects his power to his character Don Vito Corleone. The cover artist employs images that show popular novels protruding like Italian villas on the hillside surrounding Puzo’s looming head-and-shoulders portrait, while the smoke
from the ever-present cigar forms a dollar sign. In September 1978, *Fools Die* debuted at number five on the hardcover fiction list, and stayed in the top five until March 1979. In its first year, it sold an estimated 2.75 million paperback copies (Hall 271). With the aura surrounding publication of *Fools Die*, Puzo as author had capped his *Godfather* success and perhaps reached his cultural and financial pinnacle.

In many ways *Fools Die* addresses the material conditions of authors that Puzo experienced, and there is consensus that it is his most autobiographical novel. John Merlyn is the serious hardworking writer who struggles to find financial success as an author to support his family. At the novel’s opening, he has already finished a novel that receives good reviews but no sales. Merlyn is set against Osano, the celebrity writer who has written serious books in the past, but recently has accepted big publisher advances without delivering the next book that is rumored will earn him a Nobel Prize for literature.

While *Fools Die* garnered many dismissive reviews upon publication, the book remains in print and has a small devoted following if judged by internet fan reviews. Because of Puzo’s celebrity status or the record-setting sale of paperback rights, reviews ran in important cultural venues but were overwhelmingly malicious. In *The New Republic*, Barbara Grizzuti Harrison calls it “a big bad book” and continues “it is boring, it is in large part illiterate; and it reads as if it were the product of an empty brain, an empty heart, and an empty soul” (34). Joe McGinniss, writing for *The Nation*, calls it a “preposterous, lard-bellied assemblage of first draft posturing and bombast of barstool philosophy and bluff” (508). Roger Sale gives *Fools Die* a more serious analysis in *The New York Review of Books* and identifies the ambition of Puzo’s project, but determines that Puzo “has grafted inarticulate bits of experience that sound autobiographical” and “ends up with a real monster of a book” (33). In *Commentary*, Pearl Bell
calls it a “slovenly dud” and explains, “the book is such a disorderly grab bag of random anecdotes that practically any of these nuggets could be omitted without making a particle of difference” (72). Irwin Shaw, writing in The New York Times Book Review, gives Fools Die one of the only reprieves with a review that is mainly descriptive: “To be readable is not always a badge of disgrace” Shaw writes, and then launches into an extended quote from the book’s opening frame. He ends with a long list of subjects that Puzo includes and describes the book’s energy as “one scene following another pell-mell, all written with unflagging vitality, the points of view constantly changing, the language flowing, bawdy, comic, highly colored, exaggerated, hypnotic.” He adds the ambiguous punch-line, “It would be a very cool reader indeed who did not devour the whole rich mixture greedily” (10).

It is no surprise that literary scholars have paid Fools Die little attention. Chris Messenger’s The Godfather and American Culture takes the only serious look at Fools Die since the initial book reviews following its publication. Messenger reads Fools Die against Puzo’s biography and relationship with elite and popular writing. He draws out the details of Puzo’s transparent portrait of Norman Mailer and suggests James Jones might have also influenced Puzo’s characters and philosophy. Messenger’s discussion is well grounded when Fools Die is compared to the autobiographical essays in The Godfather Papers. However, putting the novel into dialogue with The Sicilian opens the debate over the writer’s cultural authority and, through the narrative frames of each novel, makes specific claims for Italian American authorship.

Fools Die does display unevenness, especially in some of its more titillating Vegas and Hollywood sections. Many of the book reviews point out the inconsistencies with point of view, the gratuitous sex and violence, and the misogynist treatment of women. I agree with
Messenger’s claims that while it “often appears unedited,” and “there’s every reason to believe that this was the novel closest to [Puzo’s] sensibilities and his quarrel with his universe” (65). In fact, in an undated audio recording available on Puzo’s official website, Puzo states, “Fools Die is my personal favorite. I thought I tried some new things in fiction, and I was very happy when it was a success” (“Fools Die”). Puzo’s rendering of playing baccarat and manipulating the fate of recruits through the graft lists powerfully captures the thrill of working a system that bleeds into a few of the sections that show Merlyn in discussion with Osano over writing. As Puzo has shown Merlyn dealing cards or taking graft, he shows Merlyn arguing how books and authors should be ranked and what shape these resulting articles should take. Merlyn’s enthusiastic systematic approach to writing connects to his gambling and bribery and show Puzo’s interest in the system of achieving power as an author instead of representing a more writerly coming-of-age. Puzo links the authorial system to the other corrupt systems of government and industry that have been previous subjects of The Dark Arena and The Godfather. These sections that detail the games of baccarat and the acceptance of bribe money highlight the absence of scenes at the typewriter struggling to write, which tend to dominate traditional kunstlerromane such as John Fante’s Ask the Dust. Burying a serious debate about authorship amid purple prose, Puzo alienates both the elite audience interested in the discussion of writers’ inward journeys and the popular readers looking for escapist fiction about Vegas and Hollywood.

B. MERLYN AND AUTHORSHIP

In texts before The Godfather Puzo creates Norman Bergeron, the delicate art-for-art sake poet who is supported by his wife Octavia’s labors in The Fortunate Pilgrim, and the
unnamed writer who wants to wake up rich and famous in his children’s book *The Runaway Summer of Davy Shaw*. These two snapshots suggest the two extremes of Puzo’s dreamy authorial desires based on money and respect.

The non-fiction pieces collected in *The Godfather Papers* aggressively weave through several material and philosophical debates about authorship, starting from the foreword where Puzo gives a qualified defense of the work he did on *The Godfather*:

*The Godfather* is my least favorite novel, but I hate when it’s knocked because it was a best seller. I never bitch about any kind of criticism, but I guess I’m allowed to say here that *The Godfather*, on a technical level, is an accomplishment any professional storyteller can brag about. And it’s not a lucky best seller but the product of a writer who practiced his craft for nearly thirty years and finally got good at it. (9)

Using trademark vernacular language—“I guess I’m allowed to say”—Puzo defensively calls himself a “professional storyteller,” then a “writer who practiced his craft” and effectively tap dances around the term “author.” As Susan Williams points out in her study of female authorship, historically the term ‘writer’ is “defined as those who wrote from experience or observation rather than from unique genius or imagination” while the term ‘author’ is reserved for those “associated with a discrete, original, and prophetic imagination, a proprietary model of production and a personality anterior to the work of art” (5). Ethnic minorities and women who have occupied similar subject positions in education and socio-economic class are often treated as ‘writers’ who are recording experiences, and less often as ‘authors’ who create imaginative works of art. In pieces like “Choosing a Dream,” “The Making of The Godfather,” “Writers, Talent, Money and Class,” “Generalissimo Mailer” and “A Modest Proposal” Puzo
takes aim at authors with putatively discrete and prophetic imaginations as well as the publishing industry that constructs them, while at the same time asserting his desire to reach the status of author in the sense that Williams defines it, what Puzo himself terms an “artist.” Many of the details included in the essays that make up The Godfather Papers are transcribed into Fools Die and connect to Puzo’s biography, including Puzo’s ambition to be an artist filtered through years of struggle before The Godfather success. Messenger claims in fact that Fools Die “functions as the retrospective of both Puzo’s actual adult experience and his writing life” (56).

In Fools Die, Puzo portrays John Merlyn as the writer as struggling artist. He takes bribes at his government job to make ends meet and then reforms once he has achieved financial security. Merlyn is an orphan who has aspired to working his way up as the archetypal self-made man. He’s the silent type who lies about his age to enlist in the Army during World War II. He thinks of himself as a virtual blank page, and Merlyn narrates: “I have no history. No remembered parents. I have no uncles, no cousins, no city or town” (57). Merlyn constructs his writing life as a character from American literary history. When he changes his name, he comments, “I had to explain to the judge that I was a writer and that Merlyn was the name I wanted to write under. I gave him Mark Twain as an example” (60). Influenced by the era of New Criticism, Merlyn reflects the belief that authors somehow transcend their own biography in their work. About his name change, Merlyn explains: “The truth was that at that time I felt mystical about writing. I wanted it to be pure, untainted. I was afraid of being inhibited if anybody knew anything about me and who I really was. I wanted to write universal characters. (My first book was heavily symbolic.) I wanted to be two absolutely separate identities” (61). This binary veers from the American tradition of “becoming,” in that “two absolutely separate
identities” implies that Merlyn does not exactly abandon or transform “who [he] really was.” Rather he separates his identities out of fear and inhibition. Jerre Mangione discusses “the psychological dilemma of the ethnic” as “tr[ying] to cope with the conflicts of a dualistic existence” (171). Puzo’s portrayal of Merlyn as “othered” orphan is as strong as any suppressed ethnic identity in this split. Even though Puzo avoids giving Merlyn an ethnic history or identity, Puzo still engages Merlyn in issues of alienation and assimilation. Like the ethnics discussed by Mangione, Merlyn as orphan fears finding himself “mired in the marshes of poverty and prejudice” (171), and as many Americans before him, he sets out to insulate himself through social and economic security.

After he meets his wife, Vallie, another aspiring writer in his fiction class, Merlyn recounts:

I was no longer alone, I could begin my true history. My life would extend outward, I would have a family, wife, children, my wife’s family would be my family. I would settle in a portion of the city that would be mine. I would no longer be a single solitary unit... I would be ‘normal’ for the first time in my life ... And for the next ten years I worked at building myself in the world (60).

Merlyn implies that he is trying to settle himself into belonging to something “‘normal’” i.e., non-orphan, building a family to play against the idea of the “single solitary unit.” Merlyn’s lack of success weighs heavily on him. What the reader already knows is that like so many American characters whose manhood is, in Nina Baym’s terms, “beset,” the thirty-one year-old husband has already “run away from a wife and three kids” (55) and vacillates between family community and individual freedom.
Puzo first shows the Merlyn out west in a casino showdown. While in Las Vegas, Merlyn tells stories to construct an image of himself as hero and even lies about the scars from his gallbladder surgery saying they are wounds from World War II (56). Before *Fools Die* begins, Merlyn has published a novel whose lack of financial success, the reader later learns, is in part why he has fled to Las Vegas. Puzo ties Merlyn’s struggle for authorial achievement to American success. Merlyn is called a “genius” and “one of the hopes of American Literature” by the critic who reviews his first novel (62) a point Merlyn reminds himself of from time to time throughout *Fools Die*. As Williams writes: “The qualities of self-reliance, orphaning and individualism that enabled literary nationalism have informed many histories of American authorship” (15). That is, writers who achieve status as authors in the American canon have much in common with traditional American characters. Puzo links Merlyn’s success as a writer to his success as an American, which in Puzo’s fictional universe is usually connected to middle-class whiteness.

When his new friend Jordan Hawley wins almost $400,000 dollars in Las Vegas and then kills himself, Merlyn decides to go back home. Jordan symbolically hangs over the book as the first of the venerated fools in the novel’s title. The story of Jordan’s suicide is one that Merlyn tells over and over to new people he meets in just one of Puzo’s many representations of oral storytelling in *Fools Die*. Described as a “degenerate gambler,” Jordan comes to Vegas lower than low—divorced from his wife and separated from his children. After forming a close-knit group of friends that includes Merlyn, Jordan takes his substantial winnings at baccarat and shares a meal with the group (32). Merlyn is fascinated by Jordan’s success. Like Jordan, he has won enough to wear the Vegas Winner’s Jacket, (a metaphor perhaps for Merlyn’s published yet unknown, unread novel) but Jordan has achieved the highest status, the
Vegas Winner’s treatment, and the big money—the gambler’s equivalent to Puzo’s highest authorial success. The sum that Jordan wins roughly equals the $410,000 paid for the paperback rights to *The Godfather* (*The Godfather Papers* 37). Puzo’s treatment of Jordan’s state of mind might be a parallel for the popular fiction gamble that Puzo took to write *The Godfather*. As Messenger posits, “Awash in money and novelistic capital after *The Godfather*, Puzo did not feel honored, nor could he honor the writer in himself” (52). Jordan’s success at the gambling tables results in more alienation and disaffection. In Jordan’s point of view, and reminiscent of *The Dark Arena*’s Walter Mosca, Puzo writes: “How dare they feel affection for him? How dare they show him compassion? They had no reason—no reason. He had never complained. He had never sought their affection. He had never encouraged any love from them. He did not desire it. It disgusted him” (33). Restless and alone in his hotel room, Jordan rejects calling his wife, his children or “any of his old friends”: “In the last gray shred of this night there was not a person in the world he wished to dazzle with his good luck. There was not one person in the world to share his joy in winning this great fortune” (34). As another character who rejects family and community for independence and freedom, Jordan’s rewards for gambling in the badlands of Las Vegas bring no comfort. At the moment of his death, Jordan finally “felt a sweet release from terror” (34). Although the suicide triggers *Fools Die* and closely connects Merlyn to the Las Vegas locale for the remainder of the book, the meaning of Jordan’s death is not entirely clear and Merlyn’s retellings indicate his struggle to understand. Merlyn watches Jordan carefully for weeks and has felt a sharp connection to him, but the suicide sends him back home to the family in New York.

Merlyn evaluates Jordan’s suicide as a loss of the capacity for affection, and his comments on Jordan’s death⁹ are another indication of Puzo’s reflection on authorship and
nationalism. According to Merlyn, Jordan “was solid American, [and] it was disgraceful for him to feel it was pointless to stay alive” (76). He identifies with Jordan but takes him as an object lesson. Puzo writes: “Like Jordan, I had gone to Vegas out of a childish sense of betrayal” (76). What is this betrayal? Merlyn’s wife Vallie doesn’t take a young lover as Jordan’s wife does. Instead, she wants Merlyn to change the ending of his novel so a publisher will buy it. Merlyn proudly refuses the publisher and thinks that she will share his pride in standing up for artistic judgment. He claims that his wife and father-in-law are “enraged” that his novel does not make enough money to support the family. Running away to Vegas and connecting with Jordan, Merlyn bitterly comes to a realization similar to Jordan’s: “Why the hell should they be sympathetic? Why should they give a shit about this crazy eccentricity I had about creating art? Why the fuck should they care? They were absolutely right. But I never felt the same about them again” (77).

Experiencing a loss of affection similar to Jordan, Merlyn compensates by remembering his childhood experiences of reading and the authors who took the place of his family members. “I read novels. Dumas and Dickens and Sabatini, Hemingway, Fitzgerald and later on Joyce and Kafka and Dostoevsky” (77). Including many authors of canonical literature, Merlyn’s list foreshadows his meeting Osano, another venerated author who need only be identified by one name. The legend of King Arthur was Merlyn’s favorite story, and he cast his brother Artie as King Arthur and himself as Merlin. Reminding himself that these authors constitute his real family history, he returns from Las Vegas to his Bronx housing project. Puzo’s essay “The Making of The Godfather” invokes Merlin locked into his cave for a thousand years as a metaphor for writing a novel: “In the King Arthur story, Merlin knows that the sorceress Morgan Le Fay is going to lock him in a cave for a thousand years. As a kid I
wondered why Merlin let her do it. Sure I knew she was an enchantress, but wasn’t Merlin a
great magician? Well, being a magician doesn’t always help and enchantments are traditionally
cruel” (*The Godfather Papers* 69). Like the legendary Merlin, Puzo’s John Merlyn vacillates
between feeling trapped by his wife and family and desiring the enchantment of the home trap.
And Merlyn’s writing has worked magic. Because of the daily letters that he wrote, Vallie
accepts him back immediately and he finds a “sanctuary” that counters what he saw in Jordan:
“I was happy to be unsuccessful as long as I could lie in a bed beside my wife, who loved me
and would support me against the world,” Merlyn tells himself, continuing, “[T]his was how
Jordan must have felt before he got the bad news. But I wasn’t Jordan. I was Merlyn the
Magician, I would make it come out right” (82). At Jordan’s “bad news” about his wife’s exit
from a twenty-year marriage, the “solid American” experiences inexplicable “fear and terrible
anxiety” even though “[h]e had friends, he had gotten lucky, [and] he was free” (18, 20). With
these things and the $400,000, Jordan is on the verge of a new life, an American reinvention,
and this is what Merlyn finds disgraceful about the suicide. Jordan is unable to start over.
Merlyn invokes the magic of his writing as the talisman against Jordan’s fall. Puzo writes in
Merlyn’s point of view: “I was sure I could write another book and get rich. I was sure that
Vallie and I would be happy forever, …I would never betray her or use my magic to sleep for a
thousand years. I would never be another Jordan” (82). Just pages earlier, through knowing
Jordan, Merlyn feels Vallie’s lack of faith in him as a writer is an insurmountable betrayal (77)
but upon his return he can do what Jordan cannot. Merlyn can start a new novel and begin
again.

After reclaiming his wife and family, Merlyn feels pressure to move on up and out of
the Bronx housing project. Puzo writes of the place: “The original settlers had been the
hardworking law-abiding poor. But by their virtues they had moved up in economic scale and moved out to private homes. Now we were getting the hard-core poor who could never make an honest living or didn’t want to. Drug addicts, alcoholics, fatherless families on welfare, the father having taken off. Most of these new arrivals were blacks” (79). The irony of Merlyn’s similar lack of financial success and flight from his family is not addressed. But Puzo does make explicit that Merlyn sees himself as different and desires a specific middle-class whiteness: “I knew that we had to get out of there soon, that we had to move to a white area” (80). Couched in terms of racial fear, Merlyn admits that he doesn’t “give a shit whether anybody thought it was racial” and adds, “All I knew is I was getting outnumbered by people who didn’t like the color of my skin and who had very little to lose no matter what they did. Common sense told me that it was a dangerous situation” (80). He desires the protection that the “white area” would somehow offer, and at the same time he categorically criticizes white people: “I didn’t like white people much, so why should I love blacks?” he asks.

The threat to the “family” along with Merlyn’s exceptionalism and ambivalence allows him to break from the rules of those “hardworking law-abiding poor” who had moved up economically and socially. In his job as a clerk for the Army, Merlyn exploits the rich families who want their sons to avoid military service: “These kids all had money or came from families with money. They all had trained to enter a profession. Someday they would be the upper middle class, the rich, the leaders in many different walks of American life” (103). His graft schemes are tangled with how he views himself as a failed author and failed American; Puzo writes in Merlyn’s point of view:

The truth was that I had become a happy man because I had become a traitor to society. I loved taking money for betraying my trust as a government employee.
I loved hustling the kids who came in to see me. I deceived and dissembled with the lipsmacking relish of a peasant penny ante Iago. … And I figured out that I was getting my revenge for having been rejected as an artist, that I was compensating for my worthless heritage as an orphan. For my complete lack of worldly success. (106)

The phrase “a peasant penny ante Iago” rolls rich images of insignificant “peasant” with the gambling in “penny ante.” The reference to Iago adds the class and race resentment toward Othello and jealous treachery that is ultimately successful in toppling Shakespeare’s Venetian King. Puzo’s conflation of these images in Merlyn’s self-description elevate Merlyn’s struggle in literary terms. By taking the bribes Merlyn finally has access to the American middle class. He launders the money through gambling in Las Vegas, and then through freelancing “beneath” his gifts, he shows alternative untraceable sources of income: “…I had had offers to do book reviews and magazine work, but I had always turned them down. I was a pure storyteller, a fiction writer. It seemed demeaning to me and my art to write anything else. But what the hell, I was a crook, nothing was beneath me now” (115). He hides the graft money in the discarded pages of his novel manuscript, covers the trips to Vegas with freelance assignments from magazines and puts a down payment on a four bedroom house in Long Island. With the energy sparked from the extra graft money and the extra magazine work Merlyn is able to begin his second novel (119).

In *Fools Die* as in Puzo’s many other novels, graft, violence and gambling counter American self-reliance and bootstrap work ethic. Unlike those “original settlers” of the Bronx housing project who worked and saved their way into more affluent neighborhoods, Merlyn achieves financial success by taking bribes and launders the money through Las Vegas
gambling which earlier in the novel Puzo portrays as a mix of skill, chance and casino manipulation. Merlyn distinguishes himself from the ethnic ties of his wife’s family and neighborhood by leaving the racially mixed housing complex. Once he achieves the financial middle-class status in the suburbs of Long Island and distances himself from the ethnic and racial others of the Bronx, he is free to apply the same strategies to achieving his literary aspirations.

C. MERLYN AND OSANO: ITALIAN AMERICAN AUTHORSHIP

As capitalism goes hand in hand with exploitation and self-interest in Puzo’s other novels, Merlyn climbs the literary ladder not only by the strength of his book, but by networking and moving through the publishing industry with help from friends and book review contacts. His brother’s best friend from college gives him his start in magazine freelancing (118). The magazine assignments give him access to the New York literary parties, which he reluctantly attends (230). At a party he meets Osano, the novelist and editor of the city’s most important book review, who offers him a job as an assistant (234). He ghostwrites articles, reviews books, and learns how the sexual favors are exchanged for page space (238).

Not quite as sensationalized as The Godfather’s mafia, Fools Die’s literati do engage a degree of corruption in literary politics—which may account for at least some of the venom of the book reviews. Of the “literary world” Merlyn explains, “I thought of it as a place where no one quarreled or bargained about money. That since these were the people who created the heroes you loved in their books, the creators were like them. And of course, I found out that they were the same as anybody else, only crazier” (239). He still works hard putting in the long hours at the typewriter, but has lost his ambition to be an artist. Although he manages somewhat to stay
above the fray, when Merlyn finishes his novel “about kidnapping a child where the kidnapper is a hero,” Osano reviews it on the front page of the famous book review (280-281). Everyone has warned him that a book about a heroic villain will never “appeal to a mass public” but the success becomes an example of Merlyn’s magical storytelling when his editor tells him “‘You told such a great story that it doesn’t matter’” (280). A thinly veiled parallel to Puzo’s *The Godfather*, Merlyn’s reaction is quite flat and Puzo quickly moves *Fools Die* to Hollywood. While the paperback rights sell for “over half a million dollars” Merlyn finds success not nearly as exciting as he did the hard work of gathering the small amounts of graft each month, or watching the chips pile up at the baccarat table.

Osano and Merlyn debate continuously about what it takes to be an “artist,” Puzo’s term I am equating with “author.” “What the hell was being an artist?” Merlyn asks, “It was not sensitivity. It was not intelligence. It was not anguish. Not ecstasy. That was all bullshit” (233). Rejecting a Romantic construction of author, Merlyn states, “The truth was that you were like a safecracker fiddling with the dial and listening to the tumblers click into place. And after a couple of years the door might swing open and you could start typing” (233). Writing is “just fucking hard work and a pain in the ass” Merlyn continues, but what is in the safe? Comparing himself to Osano, Merlyn claims: “I was just a storyteller. ‘You’re an artist with divine inspiration … You’re the intellectual, you’ve got a fucking brain that could squirt out enough bullshit for a hundred courses on modern literature. I’m just a safecracker. I put my ear to the wall and wait to hear the tumblers fall in place’” (264). If Merlyn’s safe is opposite of Osano’s divine inspiration, then the novelistic material in the safe already has value and is being held from Merlyn. In Puzo’s metaphor, Merlyn has to patiently wait to crack the access code to work on material that ultimately he admits “was most times not all that valuable” (233).
Merlyn’s comment returns to a construction of author that predates the post-structuralist “author-function” and even the Romantic genius. Pease traces the debate over authorship back to medieval culture where the word “author” was used interchangeably with “auctor” “which did not entail verbal inventiveness, as ‘author’ did but the reverse—adherence to the authority of cultural antecedent[s]” (105). In medieval times, as Pease explains, auctores established the founding rules and principles which governed the disciplines of knowledge (106). New problems and experiences were transcribed and sanctioned through the established “moral and political authority” and if an event or experience did not apply to the established authority it didn’t get recorded. Pease writes, “Worldly events took place in terms sanctioned by an authoritative book or were not acknowledged as having taken place at all” (106). Merlyn’s figure of artist-as-safecracker is more aligned with adherence—the writer transcribes the cultural authority, that is, interprets and explains the material that already has value locked away in the safe that needs to be cracked—although the illegality of the “safecracker” implies a theft of that cultural authority in addition to an adherence to it. By using the “cultural antecedent[s]” the “auctor’s” power, which comes from the cultural value of the original material, reinscribes the cultural values and discourse. On the other hand, Puzo’s construction of Osano conflates the “divine revelation” and the “verbal inventiveness” of what Pease attributes to the Renaissance “author.” With global exploration and the flowering of the Renaissance culture, the old texts could no longer explain the new experiences being brought back from explorers, merchants, and colonists. Pease claims:

Among these new cultural agents were ‘authors,’ writers whose claim to cultural authority did not depend on their adherence to cultural precedents but on a faculty of verbal inventiveness. Unlike the medieval auctor who based his
authority on divine revelation, an author himself claimed authority for his words
and based his individuality on the stories he composed. (107)

In Pease’s terms, Osano’s writing cannot be constrained or explained by pre-existing texts or experiences. He authors his own separate cultural realm through his language, behavior, and texts. Osano’s constant over-confidence in his own power, behavior, judgment and opinions shocks his audience in encounter after encounter with other writers, ex-wives, filmmakers and even people he meets on airplanes. Merlyn’s job as assistant is in part to clean up the messes he leaves behind. Osano thinks he will win the Nobel Prize, writes articles that “murder” classic novels, modern novelists and critics (236). He includes something about his “big,” Nobel Prize-worthy, novel-in-progress in every article and book review he publishes regardless of the topic. With his maverick sexuality and devil-may-care swagger he writes himself large and claims an individual authority that puts him outside of society’s social, moral and legal conventions. With Puzo, names resonate, and osano in Italian is the third person plural conjugation of –osare meaning to dare or to venture. Osano in Italian translates into “they dare,” and Puzo inscribes him as one of the adventurous, daring other. “The discovery of phenomena that could not be explained by the writings of the auctores,” Pease claims, “produced an ‘other nature’ within the Renaissance men” and “[t]his ‘other’ within[,] ultimately became the basis for the autonomous subject” (109). Osano seizes the authority to write what he writes and reflexively becomes his own authority.

Osano’s cultural collateral as author, however, is also tied to American nationalism. Continually he is called “the most famous writer in America” (120), the “greatest writer in America” (249), “the greatest living American writer” (125), “the most brilliant mind in American letters” (231) and has been nominated for honors such as the National Book Award
Merlyn aspires to this American greatness and signs on to work for him. Puzo gives a one-line summary of Merlyn’s kidnapper book, but gives only evaluations of Osano’s novels. What he writes about is not important to Fools Die, what is important is his status and character as author. Merlyn explains: “His early work was first-rate, with precise scenes like etchings. … His later books became deeper, more thoughtful, the prose more pompous. … But I thought his last three books were lousy. The critics didn’t” (234). This is a missed opportunity for Puzo to interrogate what constitutes the subject of an American novel worthy of such praise. In his own books and essays Puzo has taken on a spectrum of serious subjects and makes claims to have read everything, yet in Fools Die he doesn’t depict what is in the novels his characters are writing.

The mise en abyme, a specifically reflexive narrative frame, also plays Osano’s Italian American ethnicity against Merlyn’s lack of ethnic belonging and refracts their aspirations for authorship back through Puzo’s biography. Puzo gives Osano a privileged upbringing and a Yale education to contrast Merlyn’s poverty and G.I. Bill night classes. If ethnicity is a relationship, Puzo dialectically works out the problems with an author’s relationship to ethnicity through Osano and Merlyn, but misses opportunity after opportunity to comment on these relationships. Osano’s name aside, Puzo labels Osano as Italian American at his death, but doesn’t represent that any of his books tell Italian American stories. The only other marker of ethnicity that could be read onto Osano is a story that Merlyn narrates about Osano’s use of the Italian word cafone; Merlyn explains:

I remembered Osano’s use of the Italian peasant word cafone. “A cafone,” he said, “is a peasant who had risen to great riches and great fame and tries to make himself a member of the nobility. He does everything right. He learns his
manners, he improves his speech and he dresses like an angel. But no matter how beautiful he dresses, no matter how much care he takes, no matter how much time he cleans, there clings to his shoe one tiny piece of shit” (361).

Osano uses the word to insult a film director named Kellino, and Merlyn remembers the description to insult the same director at a moment when Merlyn’s authorial power over the script is challenged. Osano “never thought of himself as Italian/American” but at a moment when his authority is challenged, he reaches for an Italian word. Merlyn, Osano’s reflection in the text, uses the same word. Essentially an cafone is one who nearly succeeds at passing for something he or she is not. Signifying an Italian sensibility, the use of cafone brings together moments where Osano and Merlyn’s writerly authority is challenged by the filmmakers. Merlyn uses Osano’s term to dismiss Kellino’s disrespectful treatment of his script. He cryptically hands Kellino a piece of paper and tells him to wipe off his shoe (362). Who is passing in this novel? Is Osano passing as author or Italian American? Is Merlyn passing as non-ethnic or author? How is Puzo implicated in both these characters?

As compelling a portrait of Norman Mailer Puzo’s Osano might have been at the time of publication, Osano’s playboy bravado mixes with the philosophic moments of observation reminiscent of Puzo in interviews. If the American hope for the Nobel Prize is Osano, what statement does this make for an Italian American authorship? As Janet Staiger argues, “[authorship] matters especially to those in non-dominant positions in which asserting even a partial agency may seem to be important for day-to-day survival or where locating moments of alternative practice takes away the naturalized privileges of normativity” (28). The dissonance of Fools Die and the infinite reflective play of storyteller versus author ultimately offer no
stable answer except that Puzo has the stature, publishing power and authority to tell the story of Merlyn and Osano as part of the sensationalized Hollywood and Vegas tales.

And how did Puzo achieve this authorial power? By writing *The Godfather*.

If authorship—respect, power, authority, canonical status—is measured by nationalism or rewarded through national pride in Puzo’s fictional universe then Osano, as superficially Italian American, has made it symbolically as Puzo himself has. Osano has passed through ethnicity to a self-claimed powerful Americanism. The *mise en abyme* that frames *Fools Die* at the opening and closing of the novel rhetorically places a mirror at either end to reflect Osano onto Merlyn in a frustrating hall of mirrors whose light bounces from authorship, to ethnicity, to class, to American nationalism, and back to Puzo. It spirals awkwardly, but Puzo tries to steer with less than subtle maneuvers like the clunky last line of the *mise en abyme*: “But enough. Let me get to work. Let me begin and let me end” (5). As Messenger puts it, “Whatever else *Fools Die* might be, it is not cunning, tricky or slick” (82); however, Puzo’s use of the *mise en abyme* is intriguing and purposeful.12

D. FRAMING *FOOLS DIE*

The narrative frame of *Fools Die* destabilizes the power that Puzo invests in authorship while claiming it at the same time. The orality of the frame asserts a challenge to the hierarchy that privileges written texts. *Fools Die* opens with three pages of quoted text written in first person oral vernacular: “Listen to me. I will tell you the truth about a man’s life. I will tell you the truth about his love for women. That he never hates them. Already you think I’m on the wrong track. Stay with me. Really, I’m a master of magic” (3). The opening serves as a meditation on the nature of storytelling and throughout utilizes characteristics identified by
Walter Ong as consistent with oral culture (*Orality* 36-50). Puzo’s opening is additive, repeating “And then,” “Then,” or “again” sixteen times to list all the things the story will include. He uses what Ong calls aggregative phrases (*Orality* 39) like “true love” “grinning skull”, “cunning criminal” or “tricky storyteller” which lend formulaic weight to an oral narrative. The quotation marks Puzo uses but doesn’t attribute to a specific speaker can indicate speech and sound. The narrator directly addresses a “you,” the listener or reader, and interacts with the audience. Ong explains oral cultures must connect the “objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings” and closes the objective distance that writing creates through “empathetic and participatory” identification (*Orality* 42, 45). Puzo creates this effect through phrases like, “you think I’m on the wrong track” (3).

The unidentified narrator brags incessantly about his storytelling ability with claims of “magic” which Jay Clayton includes as an example of the “archaic symbolic mode” that challenges “official culture” and “authorized forms of knowledge” (95). Ong would call it an example of “bragging about one’s prowess and/or verbal tongue-lashings” that occur frequently in oral narratives (*Orality* 44): “I know—I know—how irresistible it seems,” Puzo’s narrator taunts, “But be careful, I’m a tricky storyteller, not just one of your vulnerable sensitive artists, I’ve taken my precautions. I’ve still got a few surprises left” (5). The orality of the beginning “Listen to me” echoes a kind of primal scene where the storyteller gathers his or her audience.

As a representation of oral storytelling, Puzo’s opening stands as a challenge to the authority of written texts which value oppositional qualities associated with print culture. Instead of the additive or aggregative qualities that oral cultures value, written texts utilize subordinative and analytic language patterns and establish objectifying distances instead of direct participatory address. An opening like the one in *Fools Die* is situational to this one story
even though it is a meditation on storytelling itself. A text that privileges written cultural traditions would invest an abstract quality that addresses a more universal theory. The orality of Puzo’s opening frame signals that a different tradition of making meaning will operate in *Fools Die*. The privileges of hierarchical knowledge contained in written texts are undermined by the representations of the oral storytelling. The repetition of Puzo’s “I will tell you the truth” cast doubt by giving immediacy to the imperative of “truth.” At the same time, the orality of the opening, serves as a reminder that oral storytelling has a communal history that predates authorship, the rise of which Pease reminds coincided with written texts and the establishment of print culture.

Further, the narrator of this opening immediately sets out the parameters of two types of authors that reflect the subsequent characterizations of Merlyn and Osano. Although not a perfect correspondence, Pierre Bourdieu’s contrasting concepts of the “heteronomous” author and the “autonomous” author help to illustrate how Puzo draws the differences between Osano and Merlyn. Williams interprets Bourdieu’s “autonomous” author as “the ideal aspired to by many high-art authors” where “internal recognition of value” is not dependent on market success (3). Thus Merlyn’s lack of financial success is countered by the acclaim that he is given by critics. Osano is initially in the position of “heteronomous” author whose value is set by “market demand” and other “external forces” such as prizes or publicity. Yet, he also has characteristics of the “autonomous” author in the admiration of the critics for his early work just as Merlyn switches to the “heteronomous” status when his second book becomes a best seller and film.

After trying to entice the reader with initial promises of a love story, the unnamed narrator boasts:
I will show you all the stretches of power. First the life of a poor struggling writer. Sensitive. Talented. Maybe even some genius. I will show you the artist getting the shit kicked out of him for the sake of his art. … Ah, what joy the true artist feels when he finally becomes a crook. It’s out in the open now, his essential nature. No more kidding around about his honor. The son of a bitch is a hustler. A conniver. An enemy of society right out in the clear instead of hiding behind his whore’s cunt of art. What a relief. What pleasure. Such sly delight. And then how he becomes an honest man again. It’s an awful strain being a crook.

But it helps you to accept society and forgive your fellow man. Once that’s done no person should be a crook unless he really needs the money (4). There is contempt and loathing in Puzo’s crude language. The staccato of the one word “sentences” punctuate like spittle. Neither of these two types of writers are honored by the narrator. As Fools Die progresses, the reader recognizes John Merlyn in this description as the writer who takes the graft to finance his writing habits. Immediately following this quotation, the narrator promises to recount what the reader will later recognize as Osano’s story:

Then on to one of the most amazing success stories in the history of literature. The intimate lives of the giants of our culture. One crazy bastard especially. The classy world. So now we have the poor struggling genius world, the crooked world and the classy literary world. (4)

Identifying the two types of authors and suggesting which features apply to which character may be besides the point in that Puzo purposefully does not identify the writers. A reader familiar with Puzo’s biography may also read both these types as Mario Puzo himself. The
narrator of this opening frame challenges how we think of these types of writers: Is the narrator Osano who wrote the manuscript pages? Is it Merlyn who vows at the end of *Fools Die* that he will use these pages in his next novel? Is the narrator Puzo himself, the author of *Fools Die*?

“I’m a tricky storyteller,” the narrator taunts the reader, and that is all that is known for certain. Contemplating this section’s text at the beginning and then revisiting it at the end of the novel undermines any definite understanding but encourages multiple interpretations. This three-page opening, as *mise en abyme*, specifically works to turn the text back onto itself.

Similar to the play within the play in *Hamlet* or the mirror painted into the background of Van Eyck’s *Arnolfini’s Marriage*, “the *mise en abyme*,” according to Lucien Dallenbach, “is any aspect enclosed within a work that shows a similarity with the work that contains it” (8). At the end of *Fools Die*, at his death, Osano leaves Merlyn 500 pages of notes for his last novel and only six pages of the opening. As a fictional physical object, the manuscript passes from one writer to another, Merlyn examines the pages and Puzo reprints the section of text from the opening Book I of *Fools Die*, finally giving it a context (494-496). In Puzo’s narrative structure, Merlyn uses these inherited pages as his own “maybe for luck, maybe for strength, maybe just for the con” in the novel that the reader holds (497). Popularly called “the Quaker Oats effect” after the oatmeal’s package that shows a man holding the oatmeal package in infinite regression, the main purpose of the *mise en abyme* is to provoke multiple “reflexion.” Dallenbach writes, “the reflexion must become the subject of the reflexion” (17). In *Fools Die*, the stories reflect and comment on storytelling, just as the novel is about novels and novelists. Dallenbach writes that the object of reflexion in the text “can cover not only the theme or the plot of the novel, but also …the story being told and the agent of the narration—to which can be added … the story, the aesthetic and the criticism of the work” (43). Puzo having
embodied versions of both Merlyn’s and Osano’s experience, uses the narrative frame to challenge the limitations of authorship, his own status as author and the criticisms that the work will probably generate. In the questions like “You’ve heard it all before?” and “I know what you’re thinking” that punctuate the mise en abyme, Puzo addresses the problems he thinks readers will have with Fools Die.

In Fools Die, then, these elements are caught together in endless dialogue, breaking down their differences and setting them against each other. Taken in a slightly different way, the distinction of one type of author reflects back the other type implying that each type’s existence is dependent on the other. The representation of oral storytelling in this frame conflates and reflects back on to the written text as well, locking each into dialogue. Dallenbach writes, “Set up at the opening of the narrative, the prospective mise en abyme provides a ‘double’ for the fiction in order to ‘overtake’ it and to leave it with only a past for its future” (61). In Puzo’s programmatic loop the pages are both Osano’s past writing and future publication in Merlyn’s use of them. Further, the orality of the mise en abyme calls attention to how the oral storytelling that Osano and Merlyn perform throughout the novel present alternative and counter narratives to what they do or what they write. Starting with Merlyn’s stories told to his gambling buddies in Las Vegas, many of the things he and Osano “say” in stories turn out not to be true in Puzo’s subsequent narration. This is true of written texts as well; Merlyn writes reviews and essays but publishes them under Osano’s name. Osano is not writing despite his claims that the book-in-progress will win the Nobel Prize. Even Osano’s publisher offers Merlyn an under-the-table contract to “finish” the novel Osano was writing and publish it as Osano’s (493).
Beyond the dishonesty that challenges established definitions of successful authorship, Puzo’s suggestion that Merlyn may write a novel under Osano’s name as he does articles and reviews or uses Osano’s left over pages to write Puzo’s novel addresses the issue of co-authorship or literary coupling. Puzo takes up the topic directly in the Hollywood section of the novel, and in a few discussions of canonical writers who may have used each other’s work as in Osano’s rage-filled denial that F. Scott Fitzgerald “had stolen all of his best stuff from his wife, Zelda” (246). The two other driving forces in *Fools Die*, gambling and graft, which ease the path to the American middle class, transform into chance and influence and determine the status awarded to these two fictional authors. Puzo ultimately allows Merlyn to achieve literary success as he achieves financial security and middle class status. The *mise en abyme of Fools Die* infuses Merlyn with the mixed power and authority of Osano, a fraudulent syphilis-addled formerly potential Nobel Prize winner. By weighing down the story of an author’s rise to success with bulky parallel stories of gambling, graft and Hollywood manipulations, Puzo undermines the American construction of authorship and his own status as author.

E. **THE SICILIAN AND AUTHORSHIP**

Even before *Fools Die* had been published, Puzo began *The Sicilian*. Weyr writes in the 1978 *Publisher’s Weekly* interview, the next book “will be a novel about Sicily and America, how Sicilian culture was carted to America, how it moved back and forth. It will be, Puzo believes, ‘a much broader novel than ‘The Godfather’ about the interplay between Sicily and America and the Mafia.’” (12). *The Sicilian* continues the messy dialogue started in *Fools Die*, but returns to the scene of the crime in multiple ways. First, it returns Puzo to the origin of his authority: the characters and plot of *The Godfather*. Framed by Michael Corleone, *The Sicilian*
fills one of the gaps in *The Godfather* and shows Michael in Sicily after the death of his first wife Apollonia. *The Sicilian* opens with Michael preparing to return to his father’s New York home in 1950. Secondly, *The Sicilian* returns to another narrative frame. As with the other texts under investigation in this study, Michael’s framing of the story of the Sicilian bandit serves to legitimize the foreignness of Turi Guiliano\(^{14}\) as storyteller and both mediates and reflects that difference back to the audience.

Like *Fools Die*, *The Sicilian* also uses a *mis en abyme*, but instead of employing it as the framing device itself, Puzo embeds it in the frame. He entrusts the fictional object to Michael Corleone who harnesses and controls the reflecting power of the mirror in the text. Lastly, with *The Sicilian*, Puzo returns to Sicily and stays there for the duration of the novel. Because Michael’s future is covered in *The Godfather*, the reader knows that he will return to America and rise to power. Therefore, on the narrative level, Michael’s main purpose is to create suspense about whether Guiliano escapes to America. Michael’s appearances bridge the main narrative arc in the book that is otherwise linear and episodic. Through the frame, Puzo positions Michael as critic—both American gatekeeper and judge.

*The Sicilian*\(^{15}\) opens with Michael following his father Vito’s orders to stay in Sicily to aid with the emigration of Guiliano. He meets with Guiliano’s friends and family, and tries to decide which ones mean Guiliano harm. The next long section of the novel follows the rise of Guiliano to power as a bandit in the mountains. Starting as a victim of police and mafia violence, Guiliano manages to endear himself to the Sicilian people through his acts of resistance and social justice, but gains as many enemies as friends. Like Don Vito and Merlyn he turns to violence and corruption when his family or honor is threatened. Michael waits to
meet him, but after sending Guiliano’s pregnant wife to America, the bandit is murdered by his oldest friend. Michael leaves the island with only the Guiliano stories.

From the very first line, Puzo writes Michael as the frame through which to view both America and Sicily: “Michael Corleone stood on a long wooden dock in Palermo and watched the great ocean liner set sail for America” (13). Puzo repeatedly uses verbs that suggest passivity to describe Michael’s actions; he sees, watches, notices, waits, wonders, thinks and listens. Messenger writes, “Michael is almost inert, never has an interesting thought, takes very little initiative…” and claims that Puzo “tantalize[s]” and “tease[s]” (244). He calls Michael a “celebrity guest,” but Michael does play an important role in the narrative structure of this novel and functions as the text-outside-of-the-text. Michael reflects the American story of *The Godfather* and Puzo’s narrative authority back to the reader. That is, as a “celebrity guest” no reader would mistake Michael as Sicilian. He appears more out of place and “othered” in this text than he has ever been in *The Godfather*. He also signifies Puzo’s success, since Puzo’s narrative assumes that the reader has read the original best seller. The second page of the novel, Puzo gives a quick recap: “All three of these men knew Michael’s history. That he was the youngest son of the great Don Corleone in America, the Godfather, whose power extended even into Sicily” (14). The details are cursory and read like a book report sloppily written from the dust jacket, “That he had murdered a high police official of New York City while executing an enemy of the Corleone Empire …” Puzo sees no need to explain; whatever “the Corleone Empire” is, he’s confident that the reader knows. As he projects outward the original Corleone book, Michael also receives the oral and underground stories of Sicily told to him and eventually seizes their authorial power for his own when he returns to America. Every section
where Michael makes an appearance is dominated by the stories to which he bears witness and by Guiliano’s text-within-the-text called “The Testament.”

In *The Sicilian*, the bandit Turi Guiliano writes a manuscript about church, government and mafia corruption. The Testament is hidden and given to Michael Corleone without his knowledge. In the opening section, Michael meets with a group of Sicilian power brokers who profess to want to help Guiliano escape to America, though Puzo later reveals they each have reasons for desiring his death as well. A priest, a mafia Don, a police inspector and a member of Guiliano’s band sit Michael down; the mafia Don explains:

“Guiliano holds a trump card. He has a diary he calls the Testament. In it he gives proofs that the government in Rome, certain officials, have helped him during his years of banditry, for purposes of their own, political purposes. If that document become public the Christian Democratic government would fall and we would have the Socialists and Communists ruling Italy” (23).

The writer trumps the mafia, the church, the government politicians, the police and personal enemies. Puzo transforms Merlyn-writer-as-crook into Guiliano-writer-as-freedom fighter. The Don tells Michael that they have all agreed “to help Guiliano escape with the Testament with the understanding that it will not be made public” (23). Puzo has re-scripted the desire for publication and the issue of art as unnecessary. The writing itself, the story that has never before been told, now holds all the magic. Puzo takes the importance of story even one step further, returning to the primacy of oral culture in that it is actually the rumors of the Testament that hold sway, since no one Michael encounters has actually read it. The mafia Don warns Michael, “‘Remember this. Rome fears the Testament, but I do not. And tell his parents what is written on paper affects history. But not life. Life is a different history.’” Just as the oral and
written clash in *Fools Die*’s frame, Puzo attempts to show their shifts in stature and the reciprocal exchange in *The Sicilian*. In the underground lived reality of the mafia society, the written text has less authority, but the official culture of Rome values the paper.

As a *mise en abyme*, the Testament reflects many of the same issues and functions as Osano’s manuscript pages in *Fools Die*. The Testament is a strange mixture of written and oral culture. It is hidden in a statue of the Black Madonna and given to Michael by Turi’s mother in the opening section of the novel (43). Dallenbach writes, “Set up at the opening of the narrative, the prospective *mise en abyme* provides a ‘double’ for the fiction in order to ‘overtake’ it and to leave it with only a past for its future” (61). A little more than midway through the book Michael realizes that the statue that Maria Guiliano gave him contains the Testament. As the *mise en abyme* does in *Fools Die*, Michael’s discovery of the Testament turns the book back onto itself, what Dallenbach calls a “programmatic loop.” Just as Merlyn’s inheriting the pages from Osano sends the reader back to the beginning of the novel, Michael’s discovery sends the readers back to Maria’s gift of the Black Madonna, which holds the story of Guiliano’s past. When Michael finally reads the Testament, Puzo describes the documents:

> They consisted of one sheaf of about fifteen onionskin pages covered with close handwriting in black ink. The bottom of each page was signed by Guiliano in the careless scrawl of kings. There were also documents with official government seals, letters with government letterheads and statements bearing notary seals. ….

> It was not so much Guiliano’s diary which recounted his history for the past seven years but the documents supporting it that could surely topple the Christian Democratic government. (248)
Guiliano’s “history for the past seven years” that Michael and Clemenza read in two hours over glasses of wine, signify the previous two hundred pages of Puzo’s diegesis on Guiliano that the reader holds in hand. The diary\(^{17}\) is another example of Clayton’s “less privileged written genres” which like the magic in *Fools Die* also challenges “official culture” and “authorized forms of knowledge” (62), but Guiliano signs the pages with royal authority “in the careless scrawl of kings.” Puzo makes clear it is the assemblage of letters, notes, and plans together with the diary that constitutes its authority and power. The Testament is a rich mixture of documents representing the spectrum of official documents, confessions, and directives in addition to the quotidian diaries. Its power is both individual and collective. “Each thing by itself was innocent enough,” Puzo explains, “brought together they built a mountain of evidence as imposing as the Pyramids” (248). The Testament reflects folkloric religious rituals and the maternal authority; it is hidden in the statue of the Black Madonna and passed along by the mother of the bandit.

Puzo passes it all forward into the hands of Michael. As a fictional object that moves among the characters, the Testament functions similarly to Osano’s manuscript pages from *Fools Die*. The *mise en abyme* of *Fools Die* grants Merlyn power—the pages are both Osano’s past and future in Merlyn’s and Puzo’s programmatic loop. As a *mise en abyme* in *The Sicilian*, the Testament also acts as a text-within-the-text to infuse Michael with the power to topple the Italian government by exposing the corruption, violence and abuse of its cultural institutions.

Since Guiliano will die shortly, Puzo constructs another programmatic loop: the Testament that writes the bandit’s past is also his future and will pass forward to America even though Guiliano does not live to make the journey. In addition, if Michael is the signal for the text-outside-of-the-text—that is *The Godfather* novel—the Testament functions as a metaphor for how Puzo interprets the significance of his own novel. Like the Testament, *The Godfather*
exposes the violence and corruption of the economic and cultural institutions of the United States. Puzo’s use of the *mise en abyme* is masterful and intriguing, though as in *Fools Die*, there are many loose ends that weaken *The Sicilian* as a whole.\(^{12}\)

Throughout *The Sicilian*, Puzo constructs Turi Guiliano as a writer reminiscent of Merlyn in *Fools Die*. As a child, Turi “‘loved books,’” the bandit’s Godfather tells Michael, and continues, “‘I thought he would become a poet or a scholar’” (40), his favorite book is the *Song of Roland* (131), and his nickname is “the Professor” (148). As he does in *Fools Die*, Puzo associates authorship with being American. Bookish Guiliano is almost a writer, and he is almost American. “He read books and talked politics,” Puzo narrates, “And of course it was always remarked that his height and formidable physique come from his time in the womb in America” (68). Conceived in New York when his father was a bricklayer helping to build Vito Corleone’s Long Island mall, Puzo often references Turi’s pre-natal American experience in terms of “waiting”: “Guiliano’s father shrugged. ‘I was a fool to come back. If I had only waited for a few more months my Turi would have been an American by law. But the air of that country must have seeped into his mother’s womb’” (28, 33). The father links his American beginning to Guiliano’s obsession with justice: “A true Sicilian talks of bread” (33). Maria Guiliano shows Michael a scrapbook of Turi’s life, again putting Michael in the position of receiving stories about the bandit. With motherly pride she has included “newspaper stories, [and] posters showing the different prices on Guiliano’s head by the government in Rome” (43). As a complement to the Testament, the scrapbook also includes the revolutionary letters that Guiliano has written to the newspapers. The letters and the scrapbook show the authorial power that Guiliano starts to amass, with the published letter resulting in the “price” on Turi’s head. Unlike Merlyn or Osano though, Turi’s writing takes its power from the audience: “Let
the people of Sicily speak out whether I am an outlaw or a fighter for freedom” Guiliano writes (43). As Puzo later gives the power of determining his value to the people who read his books, Guiliano determines how his worth will be set and rejects the authority of the social and government institutions that have put a price on his head. Michael, the interlocutor who interprets the Sicilian culture for the reader of the novel, also gives Guiliano his approval. After reading the letter, he thinks, “It sure as hell didn’t sound like a bandit on the run” (43).

Michael continues as the audience for the stories that everyone tells him, and like a critic he tries to interpret what he hears and what he reads for Puzo’s readers. “Michael thought, What the hell was this man saying? Why couldn’t he get a straight answer from any of them? Because this was Sicily, he thought. Sicilians had a horror of truth. Tyrants and Inquisitors had tortured them for the truth over thousands of years. …But truth was a source of power, a level of control, why should anyone give it away” (28-29). The more time passes and the more stories he hears, the less certain he is of his analytic powers: “Michael thought, What a strange story. Why does he tell it to me?” (353). As the frame through which Sicily and Guiliano are interpreted, Michael gains the power to assess the value of Guiliano’s story as well as to determine the story’s relationship to America. Puzo reinforces this power in a scene that appears shortly before Michael and Clemenza read the Testament. Clemenza seeks new recruits and he and Michael interview Sicilian men who want to go to America and work for the Corleones: “Clemenza asked questions about the man’s personal life. Was he married? Did he have children? How long had he worked for Don Domenic? Who were his relatives in Trapani? Did he ever think of going to America to make his fortune?” (238). Puzo writes the scene as a test of potential Americanness, and Clemenza makes it clear what he offers in return. The American dream written by Puzo is the mafia—“little jobs first,” then “a chance to make
their bones” and finally “a good living for the rest of their lives as long as they remain loyal” (238). By Michael’s reading the Testament and listening to the oral stories that people tell him through the dual frame of American and Sicilian nationalism, Puzo returns to a model of authorship that “links the author and critic in a shared project” as Pease writes (111). Puzo moves away from the individual struggle for autonomy and authority that dominates Fools Die, and moves Merlyn and Osano’s circular discussions of authorship to the cultural realm.

Once again the map that Donald Pease provides is helpful to locate the shifts in Puzo’s construction of authorship in The Sicilian. Pease explains, “The term ‘author’ originally arose out of the sense of constraint experienced by the finite human subject. The authorial subject claimed the power at once to produce and to supersede those limitations” (114-115). As the aspiring author in The Sicilian, Guiliano writes letters to the newspapers “proclaiming he was the ruler of Western Sicily” (257). Like the acts of revolution, theft, murder and kidnapping that he performs, he writes to exceed his boundaries and “unleash his fury against all his enemies.” By publishing the letters, the newspapers are complicit in Guiliano’s claim, though they print them to make fun of his claims as well. The result is to produce what Pease calls an “autonomous cultural sphere” ruled by the bandit. Puzo moves the claim for authorship to the cultural realm, and the Testament is the claim, the proof, and the method of seizing authority.

At his Godfather’s suggestion, Guiliano decides to write the Testament, “a document that would be a record of everything that happened to the band, that would detail any secret deal Guiliano made… It could become a great protection” (165). Guiliano, the formerly bookish boy and aspiring poet, recognizes the Testament’s potential, “Even if it had no power [to protect the bandits from the mafia and the government], even if it were lost, he dreamed that perhaps in a
hundred years some other rebel might discover it” (165). That future rebel turns out to be Michael Corleone.

After Guiliano’s death, Michael returns home to a family feast with cameos by all the famous Corleones “his brother Fredo flew in from Vegas, there was Connie and her husband Carlo, there was Clemenza and his wife, Tom Hagen and his wife” (396). He meets Don Corleone in “the library” where they toast to their new partnership. Puzo shows Michael as a failed reader and critic; Michael whines: “I never really understood what the hell was happening, I could never get the sides right. You told me to trust Don Croce, but Guiliano hated him. I thought the Testament being held by you would keep them from killing Guiliano, but they killed him anyway. And now when we release the Testament to all the newspapers, they will have cut their own throats.” Vito responds, “looking at him coolly. ‘That is Sicily… There is always treachery within treachery’” (397). The Don reveals he made a deal with those incriminated by Guiliano’s text that he would secure the Testament and keep it hidden in exchange for Michael’s protection in Sicily. Even after Guiliano’s death and Michael’s homecoming, the power of the Testament is more useful to the Corleones as an “unpublished” loaded gun. Vito and Michael hold the power to publish the Testament or not. Beyond the metaphor of the reader, critic, and publishing industry’s power to grant Guiliano authorship status, Puzo acknowledges that it is a shared operation and furthers the arguments of Fools Die. Authorship has lost the cache that Puzo once believed it held. The Testament’s power is in the fact that the stories exist—not that they are published. The rumors that will circulate orally about the text will wield more power than the actual text, just as the rumors of Osano’s next novel increased the attention he received. By granting such power to the text itself, Puzo moves one more step away from where he began with the power of the artist-writer. The Testament’s
fame spreads through word of mouth and the collective assemblage of its composition reinforces this point and attests to the lasting influence of oral culture.

Michael ultimately judges the Testament worthy to cross to America, granting Guiliano’s story access like the other twelve Sicilians chosen by Clemenza to emigrate to the United States. Just as the other recruits, the Testament waits to prove itself with the “little jobs” and shows loyalty by staying in the Corleone vault. It has already “made its bones” by insuring Michael’s safe return to the United States. The legend of Guiliano is absorbed into the legend of the Corleones. The Testament authorizes Michael’s power, just as The Godfather gave monetary and literary status to Puzo. After the struggles with Italian American identity enacted in Osano and Merlyn’s narrative of alienation, Puzo returns to the source and embraces the Sicilian story as part of his American mythos. He testifies through his most famous and powerful characters, Vito and Michael Corleone, and in the process symbolically proclaims himself “the king of Western Sicily” or more humbly, the author of “a document that would be a record of everything that happened to the band,” the band of Italians in America.

By not publishing the Testament, Vito teaches Michael a lesson about authorship. When Michael insists that Vito publish the manuscript to honor Guiliano’s legend and memory Puzo writes Vito’s response: “...I do not envy him his fame. You are alive and he is dead. Always remember that and live your life not to be a hero, but to remain alive. With time, heroes seem a little foolish” (399). Vito echoes another of Puzo’s foolish heroes; at one point in Fools Die Jordan tells Merlyn, “show me a hero and I’ll show you a corpse…” (12). Like artists and gamblers, heroes are fatally foolish in Puzo’s fictional universe. The text remains in the Corleone vault, authorizes Michael’s future rise to power and gives him his first lesson from his father, “the one he learned best.” Michael’s last appearance in The Sicilian closes the frame and
turns the novel back onto Michael’s story in *The Godfather*, but it can also be read as the struggle of a Puzo as a writer: “[The lesson] was to color his future life, persuade him to make terrible decisions he could never have dreamed of making before. It changed his perception of honor and his awe of heroism. It helped him to survive, but it made him unhappy. For despite the fact that his father did not envy Guiliano, Michael did” (400).

**F. CONCLUSION**

In Puzo’s second and last *Publisher’s Weekly* interview in 1996, he quips about writing “an epic historical about the Mafia.” “I write a book about the 700 years of the Mafia, then I drop dead,” he jokes. ‘Everybody’y’s had enough of the Mafia, everybody’y’s had enough of me.’” The comment prompts the interviewer to ask Puzo about his legacy:

> Whether time will rate Puzo as a great writer or less remains to be seen. He has his Oscars but no major literary prizes, no Pulitzer. “I would have loved to have won a Pulitzer,” he says. “But if you go back over the books that won, are they read today? I think the test is, do people keep reading them? Now it’s, what, 27 years since *The Godfather*? I still get a royalty check from England, for a substantial amount. Jesus Christ, 27 years, selling a book, that’s something.”

(Zaleski 65)

It’s the tempered response that Merlyn may have given. Three years later Puzo performs Osano for Camille Paglia in the *New York Times*; she writes: “Despite his ethnic themes, Mr. Puzo says he ‘resents’ being called Italian-American. ‘I’m American!’ he proclaims.” Qualified with a comment that Guiliano might have spoken, Paglia writes: “He harbors animus against Italy for what he considers its former lack of philanthropy and indifference to the poor” (C12).
Whether he claims to or not, Puzo writes his experience with authorship into the larger Italian American experience recorded in his novels. By juxtaposing the writers in *Fools Die* with the writers in *The Sicilian*, Puzo’s dark conflicting attitudes toward writers and Italian American ethnicity expose a spectrum of powerlessness to privilege. In the background is the historical personage of Mario Puzo whose *The Godfather* virtually authors Italian American ethnicity for American culture.

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1 Sutherland’s study of the 1970s bestsellers claims *The Godfather* is “the bestseller of bestsellers” (46). Zaleski’s 1996 *Publishers Weekly* Interview claims that after twenty-seven years in print the novel had sold twenty-one million copies (64). In recent decades Puzo’s sales ranking was certainly bested by books like Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*.

2 As with only the most famous, Puzo gives Osano no first name in the novel.

3 While names often serve as ethnic markers, it is arguable whether readers view “Osano” as Italian on the first reading. At least one reviewer, the Italian American writer Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, wrote: “it sounds more like a Japanese television set to me” (35).

4 The last section of *Fools Die* is most appropriate for inclusion in a future essay that needs to be written about Puzo’s work in the film industry: co-authoring the *GF* scripts with Coppola and working on other films from the 1970s and 1980s such as *Superman, Superman II, Earthquake*, and *The Cotton Club*.

5 See Weyr for the representative *Publishers Weekly* photograph. Book reviews included caricatures; the McGinniss article includes a drawing where Puzo’s glasses are represented as dice, and the Sale review depicts Puzo on his back with his face obscured with thick glasses and blocked by an enormous belly while he types with a large cigar between his fingers. See also “Paperback Godfather” for the famous 1978 *Time* cover illustrated by Braldt Bralds.

6 See Jessica’s Maucione article on Fante’s *Ask the Dust* as a *Kunstlerroman*, especially her discussion of Fante’s scenes of typing as labor; Maucione claims, “Arturo naturalizes his status as a writer – a starving artist determined to sell his ideas rather than a laborer who sells his body for survival. Like Fante, Arturo writes his way out of the working class, which means exile from Bunker Hill, the site of the writer’s becoming” (111-112). There are no such scenes of Merlyn or Osano working at writing, and as such, Puzo does not position the work of writing as a viable means of social mobility or artistic success.
The popular assumption that Puzo had close mafia connections and based *The Godfather* on his own experience can be read as one example of his designation as ethnic ‘writer.’ In *The Godfather Papers*, he writes: “In different parts of the country I heard a nice story: that the Mafia had paid me a million dollars to write *The Godfather* as a public relations con. I'm not in the literary world much, but I hear some writers claim I must have been a Mafia man, that the book could not have been written purely out of research. I treasure the compliment” (36).

Nina Baym famously theorizes the New Critics veneration of “melodramas of beset manhood.” She describes how the novels are championed for the myth they inscribe: “The myth narrates a confrontation of the American individual, the pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances, with the promise offered by the idea of America. This promise is the deeply romantic one that in this new land, untrammeled by history and social accident, a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition” (11).

Merlyn’s judgment that Jordan has lost of the capacity for affection is one of many connections between Jordan and *The Dark Arena*’s Mosca. The two novels deserve to be put into comparative dialogue. Puzo opens *The Dark Arena* with Dostoevsky’s notion of hell: “Fathers and teachers, I ponder ‘What is hell?’ I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love.” Puzo ends *Fools Die* by invoking Dostoevsky: “I suffer, but still I don’t live. I am an X in an indeterminate equation. I am a sort of phantom in life who has lost all beginning and end” (530). While Mosca will roam through the shadows of World War II’s ruins, Merlyn claims a kind of discursive wandering and echoes Dostoevsky at the very end of *Fools Die*: “I suffer, but I still live. It’s true that I may be a sort of phantom in life, but I know that I am an X in an indeterminate equation, the X that will terrify mankind as it voyages through a million galaxies. But no matter. That X is the rock upon which I stand” (531).

I am compelled to note that Puzo’s ongoing debate on authorship includes no references to women writers, with the exception of one partial quote from Jane Austen and a dismissal of Zelda Fitzgerald, although he represents Merlyn’s wife Vallie as a student in a writing class when they meet. Her story about “her Irish uncles who were all drunks” is laughed at for supporting stereotypes. In class a patronizing Merlyn defends her because he explains, “though it was a good story, I knew she would never be a real writer. Everybody in class was talented, but only a few had the energy and desire to go a long way, to give up their life for writing” (58).

Merlyn’s attitude about magazine writing echoes Puzo’s comments about writing a popular novel like *The Godfather*. In *The Godfather Papers*, Puzo writes: “The book got much better reviews than I expected. I wished like hell I’d written it better. I like the book. It has energy and I lucked out by creating a central character that was popularly accepted as genuinely mythic. But I wrote below my gifts in that book” (41).

I wish like hell he’d written it better.
Though it is beyond the scope of this essay, Puzo’s collaboration as screenwriter in Hollywood cannot be underestimated given his numerous digs at the film industry recorded in subsequent interviews. Also, worthy of a future investigation is the collaborative relationship that Puzo shared with his companion Carol Gino who finished his last novel, *The Family*, after his death. In Puzo’s 1997 interview with Camille Paglia he said that without Gino “he would not have finished his last two books” and “her sharp critiques ... gave greater realism to his female characters” (C12).

See Mazzucchelli for a detailed discussion of how Puzo changes the biography of Salvatore Giuliano into the character of Turi Guiliano beyond the switching of the letters in his last name. She claims: “In the end, however, *The Sicilian* does not have the ambition to be an(other) biography of the bandit, nor is it interested in historical accuracy acting as it does at the level of mythic narrative” (115).


Mazzucchelli discusses how the reviewers of *The Sicilian* viewed Michael’s presence in the novel as crass commercialism and agrees that, “Unfortunately, though, *Michael* is an inessential character, whose presence in *The Sicilian* was most likely meant as a literary device aimed to lure the Godfather-afficionados into buying the book” (118). While there may be some truth to this motive, it does not exclude the issue of authorship, since Puzo’s experience of authorship is always connected to money (or lack of money).

See Chapter 2 for how the writing of his own story inscribes selfhood. In part, Guiliano’s is able to shape and control his identity through his writing about his adventures and struggles as he continually migrates around the mountains of Sicily.
VI. MYTHOLOGIZING RACONTEURS:
PERFORMING THE FOLKTALE
in Tony Ardizzone’s *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu*
and Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*

The representation of the author figure dominates novels like *Fools Die* and *The Sicilian*, but the relationship between author and story is impossible to separate. Mario Puzo’s use of traditional stories and personal biography in *The Sicilian* transforms into the collective authorship he constructs, while the stories and myths propagated about *The Godfather* become the foundation of *Fools Die*’s two contrasting figures of American literary authors. The conundrum reaches back to the oral tradition—what takes precedence, the story or the storyteller?

While stories construct the self and the regional community’s ideology, they can also function to bring together larger groups of people in the building of a mythologized shared past. Writers who mythologize the past through stories structure ethnic experience by reifying a set of origin tales which reiterate the constraints suffered in the previous eras as the reason for the imagined community and by offering an imagined community as compensation. In the United States, where immigrants from Italy brought a strong regional village allegiance but little loyalty to an Italian national identity, stories and storytelling have worked to assemble connections between disparate groups of regional Italians. Over generations, the consequence
of the story traditions has constructed a composite Italian American cultural group identity. As the conflicting stories of unreliable narrators challenge authoritative narratives of power, writers who re-imagine or utilize elements of folktale use the values included in these structures to subvert and warn of future problems. Novels, like Puzo’s *The Godfather* or *The Sicilian*, not only use ethnic folklore, they create a folklore of Italian American ethnicity for popular culture. Other novelists rewrite ethnic folklore directly into their narratives or utilize structures and elements of traditional folktale in contemporary situations to connect with past folk traditions.¹

In their use of folkloric storytelling, Tony Ardizzone’s *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu* (1999) and Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997) each rewrite folktale, and, through their use of frames, interrogate how stories create shared community responsibility. Each writer represents how oral knowledge is transmitted across time and space. Oral tales pass through years and over geography via social and individual material realities, while the novelists construct frames to structure and foreground these situated contexts.² Ardizzone uses traditional Sicilian stories and rewrites them in the American context to construct Italian American urban folktale that help characters move forward in contemporary American life with an understanding of the past. In contrast, DeLillo constructs American urban legends on a national scale that function as modern folktale and trace backward in time to the ethnic “old neighborhood” that drives the characters’ ethnic identity and operates as the source of Italian American personal folklore. In each novel, the action and form of storytelling is as important as the stories told.

Both Ardizzone and DeLillo write in the context of post-modernism, which allows each to explore the meta-narrative and ambiguous qualities that result from juxtaposing folklore with tales of ethnic experience in the United States. They deploy the frame as a tool to focus and to
foreground their inquiries. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes the folklore of ethnicity as “syncretically multiple,” and states that these contradictory elements feature “a heightened awareness of cultural diversity and ambiguity” as well as “a well-developed capacity for reflexivity or self-reflection” (43). The self-reflexive frame foregrounds how the archaic mixes with the modern in these two novels, and telescopes the resulting tension. Krisheblatt-Gimblett writes,

The experience of culture contact throws aspects of each [cultural alternative] into high relief, creating what may be called the cultural foregrounding effect, as one inevitably compares one’s own ways and differences. The issue is not the degree of cultural difference involved, objectively speaking, but the social significance attributed to any similarity or difference, however small. (43-44)

In other words, the frame heightens the comparative rhetoric of each novel, and intensifies the tension created by that comparison. In Ardizzone’s *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu*, the stories are being told in Sicily (real and imagined) to the American-born grandchildren who have traveled back to the barren gravel fields of their grandfather’s abandoned hovel. Not only do the stories compare “the old world” with “the new world,” the frame itself encourages the same comparison. In DeLillo’s *Underworld*, the opening frame sets up the comparison between the homerun that wins the baseball game, the Russian atomic bomb test, and the gunshot that sends Nick Shay to juvenile detention for manslaughter. The national pastime and the international atomic conflict are set against the limitations of growing up in the ethnic Italian neighborhood and the three situations define the half-century scope of the novel’s exploration. DeLillo emphasizes the comparison of the three events continually in the structural return to the story of the ball which becomes the symbol for the old world innocence of an all New York baseball
tournament versus the global expansion to the new atomic age. For Nick Shay, the baseball’s symbolism compares to his experience of the limited ethnic neighborhood, which is simultaneously shattered and expanded by the gunshot that removes him from the Bronx and eventually results in his Jesuit education. The ball becomes the object of Nick’s obsessive self-reflection and a tangible touchstone of the archaic naïveté of his childhood lost to the modern implications of the nuclear age. DeLillo’s frame adds the folkloric echoes of storytelling onto the ball and its oral history which forces the reader to compare the betrayal of Cotter Martin by his father with the disappearance of Nick’s Italian American father.

A. FOLKLORE AND NATIONALISM

In their use of folktales or elements of folk storytelling, Ardizzone’s and DeLillo’s novels draw on the subversive ideology associated with the folktale tradition. As Jack Zipes has theorized, during each age, each community makes changes to folktales so that they reflect the needs and desires of the people in the prevailing group. Zipes writes, “[T]he tales are reflections of the social order in a given historical epoch, and as such, they symbolize the aspirations, needs, dreams and wishes of the people, either affirming the dominant social values and norms or revealing the necessity to change them” (Breaking 5–6). The updating that Ardizzone and DeLillo do in their use of folktales is the most recent reinterpretation in the long chain of changes made to the tales over the years. While Ardizzone and DeLillo capture their stories on the page, the oral nature of folktales in the past served to circulate the stories as “communal property.” The storytellers became the voice of the community “who gave vent to the frustrations of the common people and embodied their needs and wishes in the folk narratives” (Zipes Breaking 4). As the community’s needs and complaints changed, the
storyteller altered the stories to reflect the contemporary problems. Because the imaginative narrative medium uses fantastic feats of animals, epic achievements of heroes, or unbelievable incidents in magical places, the storytellers added criticisms of the ruling class through metaphor and symbolism in the language of the common people which sometimes slipped by those in power. Zipes writes, “Not only did the tales serve to unite the people of a community and help bridge a gap in their understanding of social problems in a language and narrative mode familiar to the listeners’ experiences, but their aura illuminated the possible fulfillment of utopian longings and wishes which did not preclude social integration” (Zipes *Breaking* 4).

Ardizzone’s and DeLillo’s novels deploy their folk elements to function in a similar manner: to offer a common historical mythos to Italian American readers at the end of the twentieth century and to argue for understandings and actions that might lead to a better world.

In addition to the subversive qualities that folktales engender, Ardizzone’s and DeLillo’s use of folklore engages a dialogue about nationalism that underscores *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu* and *Underworld*. Historically, the study of folklore stretches back to the rise of nationalism that resulted from the European exploration of the Americas in the early 1500s. Dan Ben-Amos contextualizes Giuseppe Cocchiara’s work and writes: “By the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Cocchiara demonstrates, folklore was strongly linked with emergent nationalism, offering people a new pride in their own traditions” (“Forward” xviii-xix). Cocchiara claims that the discovery and exploration of the New World with the resulting myths of the Noble Savage and the Edenic Wilderness compelled European cultures to refocus study on their own primitive origins in the form of folk traditions and stories. Scholars and folklorists emphasized the unique characteristics of these traditions that reflected national values and qualities. In *The History of Folklore in Europe*, Cocchiara outlines a trajectory of
study where writers and scholars from the privileged classes collected stories and studied cultures from poor agrarian populations to assert a romanticized group identity. Moving from Montaigne and Rousseau to Herder and later anthropological schools of thought Cocchiara traces how folklore became “an instrument of politics.” Discussing German folklore, he describes the popular belief that “the greatness of a nation is measured by the degree of its attachment to its language, religion, usages, customs, thought, and life...” (201). Cocchiara explains that this way of thinking had several earlier sources, where writers positioned folk traditions as a symbol of nationality in “that each nation derives its national spirit from its sense of individuality.” According to Cocchiara, the Romantics adopted the concept as the “cultural and political ideal”; he writes:

> Whether or not these romantics had a folkloristic concept of nation, they agreed that if a nation is the sanctuary where man can find a freedom that allows for individuality, it is also a living symbol of folk traditions. Indeed, these traditions, in the best sense of the word, converge and cohere in such a nation, actually creating it. Strengthening the force of tradition, then, contributes to self-awareness, an awareness of one’s own past as a concrete historical reality. (202)

In these terms, a nation is comprised of individuals who also adhere at least symbolically to a set of folk traditions, which not only strengthens each individual’s “self-awareness” but awareness of the dominant national identity as well. Both novels by Ardizzone and DeLillo connect characters’ self identity with versions of this European configuration of nationalism.

In the United States, however, folklore’s relation to nationalism has developed within a more complex matrix. After the American Civil War, the study of folklore intensified, but instead of focusing on folk traditions that would symbolically solidify a national American
identity, folklorists attended to politically differentiating minoritized “folk” populations from the dominant American “non-folk.” Writing about the history of folklore study in America, John Roberts claims:

> Historically, our efforts have been neither apolitical nor lacking in influence from imperatives deriving from nationalistic ideologies as they have manifested themselves through American history. It is simply the case that, when we have evoked nationalism as an influence, we have tended to turn it on its head in the way suggested by Billig:⁵ American folklorists working in an established nation have tended to see nationalism as the property of those on the periphery rather than those at the center. (49)

That is, in the United States, the study of folklore has focused on defining nationalistic characteristics⁶ as much as it has been used to study the dynamics of group identity within the nation. Roberts clarifies:

> If nationalism is characterized not only by a generally accepted ideological component, but also by a “subjective element” that allows it to manifest itself as a project dedicated to defining relationships within a nation, then one is better able to understand a characteristic of nationalism that has facilitated folklore study around the world. Within various nations, folklore study was inaugurated to establish a relationship between groups that came to be represented as folk and non-folk. Within this configuration, the folk were perceived as the marginal and seemingly backward segment of a relatively culturally homogeneous population. (47)
The study of Native American and African American folklores emphasized difference and their oral traditions distinguished them from the literary traditions of the fledging American literature still competing with the British tradition. Later, while in Europe each nation’s folklore held importance for each country’s ideological identity, the folklore of European immigrants in the United States was examined as oral and non-literate, inferior to both European and American traditions. Ardizzone’s and DeLillo’s use of Italian folklore and folktales in these two novels then is a strategy that contests an assimilationist view of American culture and consciously asserts an ethnic cultural difference which connects Italian American experience to an Italian folkloric tradition as well as a minoritized folk tradition positioned on the margins of dominant American culture.

The complicated historical and political connotations of using folkloric stories and storytelling along with the subversive and utopian elements of the stories themselves assert rich, although sometimes contradictory, layers of meaning over the novels by Ardizzone and DeLillo. As Italians and Sicilians traveled to the United States in large numbers during the height of the first waves of immigration, individuals did not have a strong Italian national identity, and instead identified with the smaller local regions and villages inhabited by their families. Pellegrino D’Acierno defines this campanilismo as “excessive attachment to one’s native town or village” and explains:

The Italian immigrants brought their territorial identities to the New World where they tended to group with fellow immigrants from the same region or village and to recapitulate their small worlds in the Little Italies of America which were themselves zoned as Little Naples, Little Sicilys, Little Genoas, and, even in terms of the micro-identities of villages or neighborhoods (713).
Because of these regional allegiances, Italian immigrants in the United States did not always identify with other Italian immigrants, nor did they share the same folk traditions or tales. The novels by DeLillo and Ardizzone in part function to provide a written history and originary mythos for the progeny of those earlier twentieth century immigrants in the United States who no longer have access to the communal folklore of the previous generations. These writers construct the folktales with oral and vernacular qualities to simulate the older way of oral storytelling. Through their efforts, Italian American readers can claim an enduring cultural heritage that reaches back to Italy and Sicily as Ardizzone demonstrates. At the same time, in *Underworld*, DeLillo uses folktales situated in the depictions of American cities to align Italian American narratives to other minoritized groups in the United States like the African Americans and Latinos who populate the shared spaces in that novel.

**B. ARDIZZONE AND ETHNICITY**

Tony Ardizzone’s third novel examines the early decades of the twentieth century. Written in the tradition of magical realism, the collected postmodern folktales of *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu* tell of a poor Sicilian sharecropper named Papa Santuzzu who sends his seven children to America to escape the hard poverty of Sicily. Ardizzone depicts a family that leaves Sicily during the second wave of immigration to the United States and then returns to recite the story at the site of its origins. Like the characters of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, the Girgenti family has gone on an imaginative (if not literal) pilgrimage back to the Sicily that Papa Santuzzu asked them to leave. Each of Santuzzu’s seven children, several of their spouses, and one grandchild each narrates a chapter as they gather (imaginatively and literally) around the fire of what used to be the Girgenti hut. Through magical folktales and the stories of
hardship, the family’s history of suffering is told to the younger Girgenti children. Sad tales of
disease, death, bitter poverty, back breaking labor, unbearable hunger, and humiliating abuse
by both Sicilian overseers and American foremen are intertwined with happier tales of love,
romance, children, justice, and achievement.

After successfully publishing two novels and several books of short stories, Ardizzone
was inspired to write about his Italian American family history while teaching a course on
ethnic American literature at Indiana University. In 2005, he recalled:

I noted that while the children and grandchildren of other American ethnic
groups were busily writing their parents’ and grandparents’ and sometimes great
grandparents’ stories, Italian American writers were largely silent. Where was
the Italian American equivalent to Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*, Louise Erdrich’s
*Love Medicine*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men*, Gloria Naylor’s *The
Women of Brewster Place* or Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*? (Ardizzone
“The Germ”)

By aligning his own novel with these examples, he positions Italian American ethnicity as
similar to the historical experience of Jewish, Black, Chinese and Native Americans.
Countering those critics who want to elide Italian American experience into a more general
history of American “whiteness,” he starts this project in 1993, a year when the debates about
multiculturalism were still playing out in the academy and the mainstream media as a threat to
traditional literature canons. In retrospect, Ardizzone explains:

In a front-page essay in the *New York Times Book Review* titled “Where are the
Italian American Novelists?” Gay Talese suggested there were none. “If there’s
a book you really want to read,” Toni Morrison once wrote, “but it hasn’t been
written yet then you must write it.” So I blew the dust off the thirty or so pages of sketches I’d written twenty years earlier and began writing a novel I’d finally title In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu. (Ardizzone “The Germ”)

In other words, Ardizzone sets out to be an Italian American writer and to write an Italian American novel. As John Paul Russo has pointed out, Gay Talese’s conception of what an Italian American novelist includes is “unduly narrow.” Russo explains: “To infer from his examples, the (a) novelist or dramatist (Talese excluded poets) should be (b) a person of Italian American descent (c) writing about Italian American subject matter (d) in an open idiom” (211). Talese’s essentialist requirements do seem to depend on biographical credentials and some vague historical definition of Italian American subject matter. Narrowness aside, Ardizzone appears to concur with what Russo calls Talese’s “strict-constructionist definition” (211). Even though Talese grounds his definition in “literary realism and reportage” and Ardizzone includes everything but realism and reportage, the novel reflects Ardizzone’s response to Talese’s requirements. Even though Ardizzone’s second novel, Heart of the Order (1986), follows the struggles of an Italian American baseball player named Danny ("Kiss of the Wolf") Bacigalupo, this earlier novel apparently does not meet the criteria for Italian American subject matter in his own view. Ardizzone states that it is his 1992 book of short stories about Morocco, Larabi's Ox, that prepares him to “take on a subject matter that [he] consciously reserved until [he] felt [he] could do it real justice” (“The Germ”) . The conscious waiting that he describes will be echoed by DeLillo’s statements about Underworld. DeLillo too will claim he waited decades in order to do justice to using his Italian American neighborhood as subject matter. Spurred by Talese’s comments and perhaps inspired by Morrison’s directive, Ardizzone sees a need to fill the gap, and explains, “The subject matter is the southern Italian
diaspora to the new world of the turn of the century; a phenomena that few other writers had touched upon” (Ardizzone “The Germ”). There is little question that Talese would accept such subject matter as undeniably Italian American and written by Ardizzone whose grandparents immigrated from Sicily. Arguably, with each subsequent novel, Ardizzone’s stories have become more focused on ethnic history and form.¹⁰

C. **IN THE GARDEN OF PAPA SANTUZZU: FRAME AND ORALITY**

Influenced by both Italo Calvino’s collection, *Italian Folktales*, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s novels of magical realism, Ardizzone claims that *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu* is “the result of historical research filtered through imagination” and that for a long time he thought of the book as “a collection of voices rather than a novel propelled by plot” (Ardizzone “The Germ”). Ardizzone does capture qualities of sound and voice in the stories and constructs a representation of oral storytelling in textual form.¹¹ The individual chapters are narrated by the Girgenti siblings, but are organized by a frame structure focused on Rosa Dolci, the wife of Salvatore, Papa Santuzzu’s third son. While each of the other characters receive just one chapter, Ardizzone gives Rosa Dolci four. Her sections not only open and close the novel to frame the other stories, but Ardizzone reemphasizes the frame in two other short segments from Rosa’s point of view both of which are entitled “Caesura.” The four Rosa chapters divide the book into thirds and provide pauses or “breaths” between the other storytellers. Time passes in each third of the novel. For example Gaetanu who tells the stories in chapter two, becomes the subject of the oldest sister’s, Carla’s, story in the penultimate chapter as she describes his death and burial.
Where there is a frame that creates an audience, as the Rosa sections do, readers project themselves as part of that audience. Walter Ong writes, “Readers over the ages have had to learn this game of literacy, how to conform themselves to the projections of the writers they read or at least how to operate in terms of these projections” (*Interfaces* 61). Ardizzone’s audience in the text is comprised of Santuzzu’s grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and readers are positioned as part of the extended younger generation that has benefited from the Girgenti family struggles in the United States but needs to learn the origin stories of Papa Santuzzu. The opening Rosa chapter directly addresses this audience from the first paragraph: “Thank God, *figghiu miu*, that even in these hard times you’re a stranger to real hunger. Do my arms squeeze you too tight? Ha! Imagine the slow and suffocating stranglehold of true starvation, like a snake slowly coiling itself around your belly and ribs, squeezing all breath and vitality from you” (1). Rosa addresses the “*figghiu miu*,” Sicilian dialect for “my children,” and asks the question in the second person point of view which also speaks directly to the reader. Ardizzone implies often that the children answer Rosa, and writes Rosa’s reactions to the children: “Ha!” This kind of dialogue, although depicted only from the point of view of each chapter’s storyteller, occurs repeatedly in the other chapters and reminds the readers of the frame’s imagined audience throughout the novel. Ardizzone continues Rosa’s monologue:

The man’s name was Papa Santuzzu. He was your *nonnu*, father of your father. This is his story and the story of his children. It is also the story of people like me, whose destiny it was to marry into the Girgenti family. God willing, one day you’ll pick up the thread and tell these stories to children of your own. (1)

Ardizzone’s use of “you” throughout the Rosa sections in particular, places readers into the audience and includes them among the grandchildren of Santuzzu. Ong suggests that the
“clumsy gambit” of the “frame-story directives” teaches the readers how to imagine themselves as part of the fictionalized group within the story (Interfaces 70). Beyond the Girgenti family and by association, the reader is symbolically positioned to experience the struggles as part of the Sicilian and southern Italian ethnic group in the United States.

Ardizzone’s frame functions similarly to those used in the medieval tales of Chaucer or Boccaccio, as Bonnie Irwin explains: “In a frame tale, the writer creates an audience in the text, providing a bridge between actual oral storytelling traditions and a literate genre that aims to depict those traditions” (125). As Irwin indicates, Ardizzone’s depiction of the oral storytelling tradition in the Rosa chapters emphasizes the role of audience across generations while constructing a literary representation of the historical site of the verbal oral tradition. Rosa describes specifically the Sicilian story circle12:

As we squatted around the fire someone would beat out a tune or hum until a second would sing or take up some instrument and play, and as the moon slid higher in the sky toward the promise of the coming day, a third would start a tale and like a weaver with her yarn, stretch it out and let it spin

\[ \textit{and end her story with a rhyme,} \]

\[ \textit{and so the next soul with a tale would begin} \]

\[ \textit{and all would pass the time} \]

bringing fresh wood to the fire, telling one story after the next, until we’d gone full circle and everyone who had wanted to had given breath to a song or story. Then the one who started the first tale would tell another so as to knot the thread...

... (2)
The Rosa sections situate the audience at an oral storytelling event, and will repeat in each of the four sections these images of the circle around the fire, the direct addresses or reactions to the Girgenti progeny, as well as certain phrases from the stories themselves. Lee Haring discusses the repetition of phrases like “Once upon a time” and “They all lived happily ever after” as another kind of bridge between literate and oral cultures, one that calls attention to itself as a frame and a formula (“Framing in Oral” 232). The “we” of the audience expands to include the many audiences who have participated over the years and generations. Rosa’s return in each third of the text, returns the reader to the artifice of the literary convention and to the culture of the pre-literate traditional oral story circle. Each section’s repetition includes small changes that indicate the passage of time and emphasize the importance of repeating the stories to each subsequent generation; the “grandchildren” (1) of the opening chapter become the “great-grandchildren” in the closing chapter (331).

Rosa begins both the first and last chapters with the sentence that starts, “Once there was a poor but honest man, un’omu d’onuri, a man of honor, who worked the whole day…” The phrase is repeated in variations throughout the other chapters as the individual storytellers incorporate it into their stories as well (1, 47, 87, 106, 126, 141, 295, 316, 331). Haring calls this a “fixed phrase”: “Opening and closing formulas frame oral performances ‘from the outside.’ On the inside, a performer may insert equally fixed phrases” (Haring “Framing in Narrative” 139). The repetition of “Once there was a poor but honest man, un’omu…” inserted into the stories within the frame, continue to make the frame present for the reader and continue to recall the oral nature of the written artifice. Erving Goffman claims that this kind of reiteration of the frame reflects the conventions required in oral performances: “In performances of all kinds, the obligation to provide continuity for the audience, that is, constant
guidance as to what is going on, accounts considerably for the manipulation of participation
status and the enactment of channels” (Goffman 234). Goffman goes on to characterize these
gestures as grossly exaggerated in order for the audience to recognize the repetition without the
characters having to comment or call attention to the repeated gesture (235). In each of these
elements, Ardizzone embeds qualities of oral storytelling within the frame and threads
reminders throughout the other characters’ stories.

Rosa Dolci’s opening chapter actually presents an overview of the whole novel and tells
the entire story of the Girgenti siblings’ immigration in the context of a brief history of Sicily.
From Papa Santuzzu’s backbreaking labor in the parched fields and through each stage of the
children’s journey from Palermo to Ellis Island, Rosa intertwines the family history with
Sicilian history first and then American history; she preaches:

Sicilia’s mighty forests were cut down. Her richest fields were gutted and left
empty. The earth wasn’t given back a tenth as much was taken from her, and
over time too many new hands reached out for her, too many new mouths ate of
her, too many hungry stomachs were born bawling out their complaints... (5).

Her focus stays on history as the Girgenti family members experience it and what the audience
should remember about it. She describes the journey in steerage and her first sighting of the
Statue of Liberty. She calls Ellis Island the “Island of Tears” and describes great hall’s
“thousand voices, all going at once in a thousand directions” (20). These hallmarks of the
second wave immigrant experience also include the tedious evaluation newly arrived
passengers were subjected to:

The doctors counted my teeth, pulled the lids of my eyes inside out with a hook,
poked my ears, smelled my skin, listened to my lungs ... The doctors searched
my hair for lice, thumped up and down my spine, twisted my hands and feet, listened to the terrified drumbeat of my heart. Some women were sent back. The doctors cursed them with signs and symbols in chalk on their backs. (20)

Spanning Italy and the United States, the lived history in Rosa’s opening frame is complemented with the magical folktale she tells of each sibling’s encounter with three old women in the forest. Repeating the tale three times, once for each brother’s departure from Papa Santuzzu’s village, she claims that the story is a test, “So when they ask you, you’d better answer right” (21). The tales, like the mini history lectures, are intended to teach the folk lessons that Rosa’s listeners should adapt about behavior, virtues, and values. The directive of the three old women in the forest is to never forget the history that ties one to family. If the audience has not learned the moral by the end of the opening frame, Rosa boldly commands: “don’t ever let go of the rope! You may share it with them if you like, let them hold one end, allow them to wrap it around themselves, whatever. But never let it completely out of your hand. The rope is la famigghia, see? Each of us is a thread, wound up in it. Before you were born, a rope connected me to you” (21-22). Rosa’s opening frame is overtly focused on the bigger picture of retaining history and memory of the past.

In the ending frame, which is entitled “Tying the Knot” to reference the rope in the tale of the three old women, Ardizzone extends the didactic purpose of the opening frame and Rosa repeats verbatim much of the language from the opening frame. As in the other novels discussed in this study, the ending frame will send the reader to the beginning section and turn the novel back on itself as in Tina De Rosa’s Paper Fish and Mario Puzo’s Fools Die. In the echo of the nearly exact phrases and slightly changed stories, time has passed, but in this last chapter Rosa’s purpose is still to impart wisdom, history, and memory to her listeners who are
now the great-grandchildren of Papa Santuzzu. In the ending frame, reaping the success of the Girgenti family’s social mobility in the United States, the children are clearly visiting the actual fields that used to belong to Santuzzu. Ardizzone implies that the children ask Rosa questions based on stories they have heard before: “Yes, Papa Santuzzu really owned a white donkey,” Rosa answers; “Yes, Santuzzu really did win her in a game of cards. No, not pinochle. Not double pinochle either. Tresette. If you want, I’ll teach you how to play back at the hotel” (332). As in the opening, Ardizzone represents a dialogue between Rosa, now a grandmother, and the children who listen and question. Ardizzone also repeats the fixed phrases again which, like the answers to the questions, emphasize the traditional orality in Rosa’s delivery, and returns to a new formation of the story circle around the fire. This time the author suggests the storytelling event takes place not only in the discursive space of imagination, but also in old Santuzzu’s actual fields. As in the opening frame, Rosa’s focus is still on teaching—card games, history, family stories—and also how to act in order to keep the past present; Ardizzone writes Rosa Dolci’s commands:

Give me your hands. All of you. Your nonnu was born right here. And here. Here. That’s right, thump the flat of your hand against your chest. And I was born there too. We were all born right there inside you, you understand? Inside your chest. What does it matter that we were ever alive if today we don’t live inside your heart and inside the hearts of your children and your children’s children? (332)

Ardizzone gives these powerful last words to Rosa Dolci, the emotional guide of the novel, who teaches the new generation to continue the relationship with ethnicity through remembering and repeating the history and the stories of the family’s past struggles. As in the
previous sections, Ardizzone uses the second person point of view to include the reader in the direct address, positioning the reader as part of Rosa’s audience and, by extension, the Italian American cultural group. The reading of the novel produces the ethnic group history, just as Rosa’s telling of the stories produces the Girgenti family history. Rosa’s dynamic lessons for continuing the relationship to ethnic identity counters the American qualities of individualism, assimilation, and “abandoned difference” with one thump of the chest. In this novel, the inescapable past is always within as long as the stories are told.

In addition, focusing on the emotional past, Rosa continues with the lesson of Santuzzu’s Garden. She repeats the story of how, before they depart for La Merica, she and Salvatore follow Santuzzu to the top of the hill where he asks them to “Regard my garden” (333). The younger Girgentis are unable to see the group Santuzzu points to “prancing in a circle” (335). Salvatore can only envision the future success of the new world and “our children and our children’s children, with so much food in their bowls that their mothers have to tell them to eat lest some of their food go to waste” (336). It is Rosa who then promises Santuzzu that she will not let the children forget about him but will teach “our old ways” (336). After she promises, and before she leaves Sicily for the first time, she envisions another story circle around the fire, and recounts that Papa Santuzzu is surrounded by all the other characters that appear in the rest of the novel. Ardizzone merges story circles into the discursive space of imagination one last time to end the novel and provides a summarizing litany of storytellers, folktale characters, saints, and historical political figures who appear in the novel and are important to Italian American history. The role call listing fills a whole page and includes: all of the Girgenti siblings, spouses, parents and children; the folktale characters Don Gattu, the sad-eyed ewe, and the old fortuneteller; Saint Joseph, Saint Rosalie, Mother Cabrini, and
Bishop Scalabrini; the activists and political heroes like Carlo Tresca, Sacco and Vanzetti, Wesley Everett, Frank Little, and Joe Hill; and even the religious icons of the Black Madonna, Jesus, and God. Everyone is gathered in Rosa’s story of Papa Santuzzu’s garden to hear Santuzzu’s story which he starts with “Once there was a poor but honest man, un’omu d’onuri, a man of honor” (338). Caught between the opening and closing frame, which starts the novel over again, the audience of readers becomes part of the community of storytellers in the frame’s never-ending production of stories.

D. IN THE GARDEN OF PAPA SANTUZZU WITHIN THE FRAME: FOLKTALES

Papa Santuzzu’s children traverse the United States making several stops on the East Coast, crossing over to the West Coast and then eventually gathering in Chicago. The brothers all set out on their own: Luigi is lost somewhere on the West Coast, Gaetanu suffers from tuberculosis and unemployment in New York, but Salvatore has had the most success in the “city of the greased palm” (126) where he has bribed his way into owning a Chicago newsstand and “exchanges coins for paper every day” (151). As examples of three different degrees of achievement or suffering, taken together, the Girgenti brothers present the spectrum of possibilities for Italian American immigrants in the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century.

In between Rosa’s frame chapters, the characters retell traditional folktales that correspond to stories like the ones included in Calvino’s collection, Italian Folktales. Ardizzone signals his use of these traditional tales in the first chapter that follows Rosa’s opening frame. Entitled “Giufà’s Hole,” the chapter is narrated by Gaetanu, Santuzzu’s oldest son and the first of the brothers to make the journey to the United States.
Having made a life in the United States, Gaetanu sends his own children by train to New York City from Lawrence, Massachusetts, where he and the union workers are on strike in February 1912. To keep the children safe and fed, the strikers send their children to others in New York to wait out the strike. Gaetanu waits with the children for the train and begins to tell them folktales to cheer them up. Ardizzone uses folktales to counter the historical reality of the strike. Gaetanu starts by comparing the children to the “princess who wouldn’t laugh” and tells them the sad tale of how a king killed “a thousand and one” villagers for failing to amuse the princess (25-26). When the story fails to cheer the children, Gaetanu continues with a story about Giufà. Giufà appears in many collections of Sicilian folktales and is “related to many other bumpkins and rascals in the European tradition in tales about Hans (German), Pietro (Italian), Pierre (France), and Jack (British and American).” According to Zipes, Giufà is “the legendary scoundrel” or “folk figure, whose antics were first recorded in Arabic tales during the late Middle Ages but were readily adapted and spread in Sicily and southern Italy” (Zipes Beautiful xxi). That Ardizzone names Giufà in Gaetanu’s story for the children signals to the reader that Ardizzone is telling authentically traditional tales even though he may be updating the details to reflect Gaetanu’s era. Giufà is a trickster-type who often bumbles through his situations causing problems, but later triumphs over those who act against him. In Gaetanu’s tale for the children, Giufà falls into a hole, but saves the life of the baron’s daughter who falls in after him (Ardizzone 27). As a reward, the baron gives him a bag of gold, but he is quickly tricked into trading it for a goose that is so sticky anything it touches becomes permanently attached. Gaetanu describes a sequence of encounters which result in the sticky mess of “Giufà, the raucously honking goose, the three curious daughters, the confused crowing cock, and the raging bare-assed farmer brandishing his pitchfork.” The spectacle emerges in front of the
princess who finally laughs at the sight (29-30). As Gaetanu addresses the children still waiting for the train, he asks if they think Giufà “took half the kingdom and married the sour princess” to live happily ever after: “Would you choose that? Would you, or you, or you?” (30). Ardizzone updates the tale for Gaetanu’s political context and reshapes it as a lesson in labor relations for the children. Gaetanu explains:

No, remember I told you that our hero was simple, not stupid... he demanded that the king share his profits with his workers, and he told the princess to gather her pot of beans that never grew empty, her plate of meat that could never be licked clean... and ordered her to go out into the countryside and feed the starving people of the fields until they were satisfied... (30)

Gaetanu seems to react to the children’s disbelief (they are being removed to New York because the union laborers are starving) by suggesting he can tell an even more unbelievable tale. He adds to the happy ending a bigger political fairy tale: “Then the king and the farmer became good friends, and the farmer ruled the campagnoli until they could govern themselves, and everyone lived with honor, dignity, and peace” (30). By updating the Giufà tale for the American born children, Gaetanu acts like the traditional storytellers and continues the relevancy of the tales for the next generation. As in the Rosa frame sections, the dialogue between Gaetanu and the children and his direct second person point-of-view addresses both remind the reader of the oral elements represented and continue to position the reader as part of the fictional listening audience.

After the children leave on the train, Gaetanu continues his story for the reader and describes in greater detail what Rosa has told of his immigration to the United States. The Giufà story underscores his description of the many ways he was tricked and taken advantage
of both on his journey from Palermo and during his first years as a factory worker in America. Giufà becomes a folk hero for the newly arrived immigrant, for in Gaetanu’s stories, Santuzzu’s eldest son encounters treachery and danger, but turns the circumstances in his favor. Zipes claims:

Giufà takes words literally, and consequently he has a limited sense of the world, for he can not grasp how words are used metaphorically and idiomatically to articulate commands, wishes, instructions, and so forth... Giufà is really not a dunce. He is someone who believes in the literal meaning of words and does not know how to communicate with a world that uses words and clothes to veil the meanings of its actions” (Zipes Beautiful xxi).

For newly arrived immigrants like the Girgentis who were struggling with new language and customs, Giufà’s small victories would be stories that provided some comfort, amusement and hope. The tales also serve as a reminder of home and recall earlier times in Sicily where the stories were told previously.

Although Ardizzone only references Giufà directly in the Gaetanu section, he does incorporate more Giufà tales into other chapters. For example, Teresa Pantaluna, the narrator of chapter three, travels to the United States dressed as a noble gentleman. As a poor Sicilian woman, she is vulnerable and invisible; she explains: “I realized that becoming a man isn’t so much a shift in gender, as it is a change in class or social standing. So I pretended to be the son of a wealthy baron, attacked by thieves on my way north and stripped of every valuable I owned” (57). Instead of asking for help, she demands food, clothes and entertainment from the peasants who stop to assist her. Additionally, there are several versions of the “Giufà and the Clothes” folktale in which he borrows “splendid gold-stitched” clothes to gain entrance to a
feast. In his loaned finery, people notice him and offer every edible delicacy. In one version of the folktale, he bitterly pours the food all over his expensive clothes (Zipes *Beautiful* 153) and in another version he eats with one hand but “with the other stuffed food into his pockets as well as his hat, saying ‘Eat your fill, my fine clothes, for they invited you, not me!’” (Calvino 687). Like Teresa Pantaluna, Giufà asserts that no one looks beyond the clothes, and both characters take advantage of the illusion to gain access to places forbidden to them.

In the chapter narrated by Salvatore, entitled “In the City of the Greased Palm,” Ardizzone seems to reference the folktale “Giufà and the Owl.” In that original tale, Giufà becomes a servant to a priest, and asks that his compensation be only “an egg everyday and as much bread as I can eat with it” (Zipes *Beautiful* 148). The priest thinks Giufà eats little and agrees to the price thinking of how cheap it will be to pay him. However, Giufà’s sense of the literal wins out and like Salvatore in a New York bar who sips his one beer in order to eat “all [he] can push down [his] throat” (Ardizzone 151), Giufà eats his one egg with a needle. Each lick of the needle is “accompanied with a large piece of bread” and Giufà outwits the priest to get more than his share. (Zipes *Beautiful* 149). Ardizzone updates the trickster’s strategy of enforcing the literal “one egg” in order to eat as much bread as possible to the early decades of the twentieth century when in immigrant bars crafty drinkers like Salvatore bought the cheap beer in order to eat the free food. Salvatore later applies this same strategy to turning paper into coin when he opens his newsstands.

In addition to the Giufà tales, throughout the chapters, Ardizzone updates other traditional folktales of magical objects, tests of strength or purity, and fabula about animal transformations. Mary Jo Bona claims each of Ardizzone’s folktales addresses the issues of justice; she writes:
Compelled to use their mature sense of wit and *furberia* in order to sustain their families and maintain justice in cruelly unjust environments—in Sicily and America—each of Ardizzone’s twelve storytellers is involved in the issue of justice in one way or another. At the heart of each of their stories lay a conceptualization of justice based on a folkloric worldview and the community of Sicilians who shares and transmits a cultural acceptance of familial rules supportive of an anticlerical and antigovernmental ethos. (*By the Breath* 32)

In following and propagating the southern Italian ideologies of justice embedded in the folktales and didactically passing them on to the next generation represented by the audience constructed in the frame, Ardizzone forces the reader into a dynamic relationship with Italian American ethnicity as contested and in conflict with the dominant community of nation. Whether the reader accepts or rejects the folktales’ ideologies of justice, he or she must react to the group identity assumed by Ardizzone’s narrative.

In every chapter, the character will update the story or the issues addressed in the folktale by juxtaposing it with an experience that occurs after he or she arrives in the United States. The “new world” American story reflects similar motifs, qualities, or challenges reflected in the Italian folktale. The updating of the old story in the new country parallels the problems of Sicily and creates new stories of hardship and struggle that will circulate as communal knowledge to replace the old oral folktales. Within each chapter, Ardizzone’s transition from traditional tales to more individual stories about living in the United States reflect how ethnic storytelling changed in documented Italian American practices. The stories that take place in the United States reflect the everyday ordinary although extreme individual struggles like being unemployed, hungry, infertile, deathly ill, or desperately poor.
In these individual stories the Girgenti siblings are presented as not only the typical immigrant family, but typical of any family. These family stories take the place of the fairytales and folklore as time passes. For example, Gaetanu’s fairytale transitions into the agonizing story of factory conditions which is then later referenced by his wife’s story and again by Carla’s chapter at the end of the book where she describes his funeral. The repetition of Gaetanu’s personal experiences function as folktales did previously.

Ardizzone also incorporates more famous figures and events in Italian American history. The Girgenti family members cross paths with historical figures like Mother Cabrini or Frank Little at events like the Rochester factory fire or the West Coast migrant worker strike. In these inclusions, Ardizzone transmits more of the communal knowledge that constructs and teaches Italian American ethnic history. In addition to re-enforcing the ethnic ideologies of the old stories, he uses the folk tradition to reconstruct Italian American figures like Mother Cabrini as folk heroes. In the chapter that includes her story, Ardizzone’s narrator, Carla Girgenti tells of a rumored anecdote of how Mother Cabrini has tea with Andrew Carnegie, John Jacob Astor, and John D. Rockefeller in order to plead with them to “consider doing something charitable for the Italians living in America, or at the very least if they might consider improving the deplorable working conditions under which the Italians in the New World labored” (311). When the three capitalists mock her and turn her down as naive about the ways of American business, she manages to leave them with visions of the Madonna and their own mothers. While this encounter results in no tangible improvements for her beloved Italian American laborers, Carla’s story has a satisfying ending in folkloric terms. Carla narrates, “At that moment each man thought of his mother and held the memory of her face in his mind, until he felt her hand slap his face. ‘Shame,’ said the three men simultaneously”
If she could not better the physical conditions for the Italian Americans, as least, in the story, Mother Cabrini gives the audience the moral victory of righteousness. The three capitalists suffer one of the worst old world punishments— that of bringing shame to their mothers. Within the ethnic folk ideology, Ardizzone constructs these Italian American historical figures as folk heroes.

In Ardizzone’s use of the frame to foreground the traditional folk stories from Italy and the stories adapted to and reflective of life in America, he is able to configure a mythological story space where the audience is empowered to draw from the folkloric ideologies and decide the limits for what they choose to accept or reject about American culture. In the stories like the one about Mother Cabrini, the storyteller and the audience is given the power to judge the industrial capitalists as representations of the American system according to values found in the traditional Italian tales. In story, one can imagine that rich men who have exploited the masses are still human enough to feel shame, but shame in terms of traditional Sicilian values. In American values, it is safe to imagine the baron capitalists are proud of the wealth they have amassed, regardless of the source. Thus the storyteller or audience member can claim an exception to and a difference from the aspects of American culture that he or she does not accept or that have caused oppressive damage to the imagined community’s progress. When the stories are told and retold over the years as the frame suggests, each generation is reminded of the differing values in competition between the rejected nation of origin and the disappointing adopted nation which perpetuates a dual identity and critical ideology. The connotations of contested Italian nationalism reflected in the folktale provide a wedge against American nationalism as well as an alliance with other marginalized groups who also have suffered from those American values. In between the two traditions exists the set of dynamic relationships
that each storyteller and audience member must construct to define ethnicity. Ardizzone’s version of that set of relationships focuses on the living mythology of characters found in folklore and history.

E. DELILLO AND ETHNICITY

Like Ardizzone, Don DeLillo has stated that he was very unhappy with his early attempts to write about growing up in the Italian American section of the Bronx. Several of those first stories were published in a small literary journal called *Epoch* during the first half of the 1960s and only two deal with Italian American characters. "Take the 'A' Train" from 1962 follows Cavallo who is a desolate man who spends his days on the subway to avoid his creditors while he reminisces about his traditional wedding, his unsuccessful marriage, and his relationship with an overbearing father. "Spaghetti and Meatballs" from 1965 depicts the recently evicted fifty-four-year-old Santullo who sits in his chair on the sidewalk in front of his Bronx apartment along with the rest of his furniture and exchanges conversation about life with another old man named D'Annunzio. Calling these early stories inferior, DeLillo, in a 1997 interview, claimed he “wouldn’t even care to look at them now” (Remnick 138). Subsequent to these early efforts, DeLillo went on to publish a string of novels that have less to do with ethnic Italian American culture, and much more to do with American culture in the nationalistic sense. From *Americana* (1971), his first novel, through *The Names* (1982), DeLillo established his reputation with critics for his treatments of language, popular culture, film, history, and politics. *White Noise* (1985) added to his reputation and won the American Book Award. *Libra* (1988) continued his critical success and became his first best-seller. It was followed by *Mao II* (1991), which won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction.
Even without Italian American characters or locales, these novels do reflect some aspects of his family’s Italian American experience without directly representing Italian American culture. DeLillo has stated that *Americana* “was a kind of journey into the broader culture” and “[a] curious unintentional form of repetition of [his] own parent’s journey, [his] immigrant parents who came to the U.S. from Italy” (Echlin 148). DeLillo characterizes his parents’ journey as a “way out of a certain narrowness” and compares this experience to his own as a writer. He states, “When I was in my early 20s maybe that background and those narrow streets seemed to be a bit constricting in terms of what I could get out of them as a writer because I hadn’t yet developed a perspective, a maturity as a writer” (Echlin 149). As Ardizzone talked about having to mature in his skills and abilities to take on Italian American subject matter, DeLillo discusses the Bronx neighborhood as a source of material that was more appealing to him as an older, accomplished writer. He explained, “From this perspective, I found nothing but richness, and nothing but warm memories and the best kind of writerly challenge, a challenge to reproduce a specific kind of location and to recount the smallest sort of gesture. . . ” (Echlin 149). Thirty years after the *Epoch* short stories, when DeLillo published *Underworld*, David Remnick, interviewing him for *The New Yorker*, proclaims, “DeLillo’s greatest feat of literary discipline until now was his ability to look away from his native ground, the Fordham section of the Bronx. It is hard to imagine a writer keeping such vivid local colors out of his work for so long” (136). Remnick’s characterization of the Bronx as “native ground” and “local color” romanticize DeLillo’s use of the Bronx in *Underworld* as a return home of sorts, and he is praised for how long he resisted it. Ardizzone had claimed that the general multi-cultural debates and challenge thrown down by Gay Talese called him to write *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu*. DeLillo makes no such statement. However, DeLillo started
writing *Underworld* after “Pafko at the Wall” was published in a 1992 issue of *Harper’s Magazine* in roughly the same climate and time frame as Ardizzone’s *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu*. Of his inclusion of the Italian American material and his portrayal of the Bronx in *Underworld*, his statements echo Ardizzone’s; DeLillo explains, “I needed to wait thirty years before writing about it to do it justice. I needed this distance. Also I needed to write about it in a much larger context. I couldn’t write a novel about a background and a place without putting it into a deeper setting” (Remnick 137-138).

While DeLillo has yet to return to such a central depiction of Italian American ethnicity in the plays and novels that have followed *Underworld*, the novel has opened the discussion of ethnicity and Italian American codes in many more of his novels. In addition, DeLillo is slightly more open about discussing details of his Italian American family and childhood. When he won the St. Louis Literary Award in October of 2010, for example, he revealed in a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* news article that: “he lived with 10 relatives in a ‘skinny, little house’ in the Bronx. He had only one sibling, a sister, but the extended family included cousins, an aunt and uncle, and his Italian grandparents” (Henderson). Also in that article he, arguably, made a joke about being Italian when he was asked when his next book would appear: “‘I never set personal deadlines,’ DeLillo says. ‘It's part of my Italian upbringing: We're not confined by certain kinds of strictures involving time’” (Henderson). In the period preceding *Underworld*, interviewers were hungry for details such as these. Since then, in his public persona, if not his new writing, DeLillo seems more comfortable playing up his Italian ethnicity.

F. *UNDERWORLD’S FRAME AND ORALITY*
The structure of DeLillo’s *Underworld* is much more complex than the structure of Ardizzone’s *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu*, and the boundaries of DeLillo’s frame are much more disruptive. *Underworld* is divided into six major “Parts,” some of which are also divided into as many as ten sections. Framing the six “Parts” are a Prologue that takes place on October 3, 1951 — the day the Giants played the Dodgers for a spot in the World Series and an Epilogue, which takes place in the late 1990s. The six Parts move backward in time across the decades from the 1990s back to the 1950s. Three unnumbered sections that follow the baseball as an object on that October day and night in 1951 while in the possession of Manx Martin are interspersed after Part One, Three, and Five. The other six Parts roughly follow Nick Costanza Shay and people who interact with him backward through the decades from his position as a waste management executive, husband, and father in 1990s Phoenix, Arizona, to 1951 when Nick was a restless and angry high school drop-out in the Italian American section of the Bronx. Like Ardizzone’s novel, DeLillo’s *Underworld* spans several generations to construct Nick’s story in the context of fifty years of American history. In Ardizzone’s novel, the conceit of Rosa Dolci’s storytelling circle evokes a fluidity of time and space, but in *Underworld*, DeLillo enforces the rigid edges of each chapter, part, or section to emphasize the jarring organization of the backward chronology.

Because DeLillo crosses ontological and illocutionary boundaries so often, Marie-Laure Ryan’s use of the stack metaphor works a little better to explain how DeLillo constructs *Underworld*’s overlapping frame structure that also divides the narrative. As in Ardizzone’s novel, in *Underworld*, multiple characters narrate their stories from various points in time and space. Ryan explains: “Ontological boundaries delimit domains within the semantic universe, and their crossing is a recentering into a new system of reality. Illocutionary boundaries delimit
speech acts within a text or a conversation, and their crossing introduces a new speaker or a new narrator” (366-367). *Underworld* moves between the illocutionary levels in the frequent changing of narrators and points of view, while the backward movement of the chronology causes the effect of ontological ruptures when the narrative moves to new contexts of time and place that do not always connect to previous narration. As Ryan states, “When the utterance of this new voice is a self-sufficient text, it generates its own semantic universe and its own textual actual world which may or may not be presented as a reflection of the primary reality from which the text is transmitted” (367). With these self-sufficient blocks of narrative, then, Ryan’s stack metaphor adds the ability to analyze the switches between levels of narrative and the ability to “distinguish illocutionary from ontological boundaries” (370). Using Ryan’s theory, DeLillo’s individual sections of the novel can be sorted into separate stacks, which delineate how certain ontological levels of narrative, such as the Manx Martin episodes, dynamically reassert themselves to rupture and arrest the novel’s backward countdown.

In these narrative jumps between stacks or sections, DeLillo provides little bridging and in fact emphasizes the disruptions in the book’s design. The use of black printing in the first edition, both the half and full pages which appear in between the novel’s parts and sections, visually represent the breaks and utilize what graphic novel theorist Thierry Groensteen has termed “braiding,” that is, in the system of the text’s narrative, the black pages link the series of breaks within the text in “iconic correspondence” (146). DeLillo himself has commented:

Structure is something I take great pleasure in. In this book, the interesting thing is how much of the book moves backward in a great sweep of time from the ‘50s in Part Six to the ‘90s in Part One. But opposed to this is a structural conflict in the Manx Martin chapters. Those black pages are not a proper part of the book
that precedes them [nor] the part that follows them. Manx is not part. His chapters come after Chapter One, Three and Five. (Echlin 149)

In other words, as the text moves backward in time from the 1990s to the 1950s, Manx Martin’s sections are locked in the narrow time period of the Prologue and focus on the twenty-four hours immediately following the Giants-Dodgers baseball game where Manx’s son Cotter had wrestled the famed homerun ball from the other greedy members of the crowd. By containing the Manx’s sections to this time frame and focusing them on his possession of the homerun baseball, which he has taken from Cotter, the sections function as the Rosa Dolci sections do in Ardizzone’s novel. They serve as a reminder of Underworld’s opening Prologue and keep present the homerun ball with all its layers of symbolism. The repetition of the full black pages act like the fixed phrases such as Ardizzone’s “Once there was a poor but honest man, un’omu d’onuri” to signal the break from the backward chronology. Similar to Haring’s “fixed statements,” Ryan names these types of transitions “calling statements” defined for how they signal boundaries: “The popping of the stack is similarly signaled by specific textual devices ... These transition-signaling devices enable readers to properly construct the stack, identify the discourse referents and orient themselves among the levels of the semantic domain” (379). DeLillo’s black pages function to stop the narrative, and the focus on the homerun ball in Manx’s possession returns the reader to the ontological level of the Prologue, the day of October 3, 1951, when Bobby Thompson wins the game for the Giants and the Russians test their first atomic bomb.

One way of reading these sections and their separateness is as a comment on Manx Martin’s socio-economic status. As an African American he continually butts up against the limits of society. He tries hard to provide for his wife and children, but always comes up short
and is always looking for a way to make extra money. He decides that if he can sell Cotter’s baseball, he can make enough money to buy Cotter and his mother new winter coats (146). In each Manx section, the character’s focus is on money, whether it is stealing snow shovels (358), helping a friend haul restaurant trash (362), or trying to talk a Giants’ fan into buying the baseball for his own son (652). Every scheme falls short however: he has nowhere to hide the shovels; the trash makes him sick to his stomach; and the sale of the ball lands him only thirty-two dollars, hardly enough, even in 1951, to make up for betraying his son and nowhere near the $34,500 Nick Shay will one day pay for the object (132). Manx is literally “man X,” and could be any man caught in the ethnic underclass of America’s working poor. His fixation on the dollar bill’s iconic pyramid is another signal that he is limited to his place in the stratified society, and without the codes, passwords and handshakes represented by the Masonic Eye that unlock the opportunities for wealth (354, 364). Writing about DeLillo’s novels before Underworld, Gardaphe claims:

Indeed, there is almost always an obvious ethnic character in DeLillo’s narratives whose very presence undoes or attempts to undo the knot of American identity. A consistent thread that runs throughout his work is the posing of the question, What does it mean to be an American? It is often through ethnic characters that DeLillo delivers his strongest social criticism. (Italian Signs 174-175)

Manx is this character that provides social critique in Underworld. Excluded from American opportunity, Manx tries to sell a piece of the nation’s favorite pastime, but still cannot gain an advantage. In addition, because he is African American, people fear him. As he wanders around the baseball stadium parking lot and grounds, DeLillo emphasizes how white men interact with
Manx and illustrates how they react with expressions “like don’t cut me up in little pieces please” (365), or with distrust, disrespect, and disgust (642-643). The strict separation of the Manx Martin sections confines the character to the long night of the famous baseball game with the attendant stalemate atmosphere. The neighborhood experiences simultaneously the win-lose of the all New York City baseball game and the nation faces a similar zero-sum future ushered in by the Russian atomic testing.

In addition to the repetition of the Manx Martin sections that break the narrative into stacks, DeLillo positions sections that focus on Nick Costanza Shay in the 1990s at the relative beginning and at the ending of the novel. These sections act as a kind of frame overlapping the Manx stacks. Some critics claim that the Epilogue takes place in a distant future, but in “Part 1: Long Tall Sally Spring-Summer 1992,” which immediately follows the Prologue, Nick’s daughter is pregnant (90), and in the “Epilogue: Das Kapital,” his granddaughter is almost six years old (809). Except for the Manx Martin sections, these two parts that take place in the 1990s are the only ones that transpire mainly in the same ontological time and place, without the illocutionary switching from Nick’s first person narration except for a small break in the last section of the Epilogue. On a structural level then, DeLillo connects Nick Shay to Manx Martin. Just as Manx returns the narrative continually to the past and that autumn day in 1951, recursively, the Epilogue returns the reader to the present time of the novel—the end of the century in the late 1990s. In Ryan’s terms, the Epilogue returns the text to the “ground level” of the stack (378); however, DeLillo merges Manx’s story with Nick’s in Part Six, which is positioned immediately before the Epilogue. DeLillo explains:

[Manx] is not part of those chapters, he’s different. And then at the end of the last Manx Martin chapter, suddenly these two conflicting streams lock together
because on the day he sells the baseball, Part Six begins. And then the Manx chapter becomes part of the larger chronology of the book. This is why I write. To try to do things like this. (Echlin 149)

In other words, “Part Six: Arrangement in Gray and Black, Fall 1951-Summer 1952” begins immediately after the third Manx Martin section on the morning after Manx sells the baseball (668). Just as DeLillo constructs Manx as a wandering hustler who spends his time in bars trying to think of schemes to get ahead, in Part Six, DeLillo positions Nick for a similar life of limits and constraints, some of his own making, because he can only see himself within the limits of the Bronx ethnic neighborhood.

DeLillo’s depiction of Manx’s neighborhood parallels the stratified space of Nick’s Italian American neighborhood in Part Six. The restlessness of Nick’s “thousand sameshit nights” (711,741) mirror Manx’s endless walking (654). Neithetr have satisfactory options for getting ahead in the world. Nick has dropped out of school at seventeen and wastes time on stoops, at pool halls, and in abandoned cars. He has a manual labor job in a neighborhood where his former teacher observes, “the less a job pays... the harder the work, the more impressive the spectacle” and where he is in danger of becoming one of “those fast-aging men who are tired all the time” (661). Nick’s unhappiness escalates and he gets into fights (714) and has an affair with his former teacher’s wife (732). He spends his time with other boys and men whose options are just as limited. George the Waiter, the man he accidentally shoots, is at first an alternative model of someone without a wife, family, or “one job for life,” but Nick calls him “the loneliest man he’d ever known” (724). Between the crushing manual labor, his mother’s unhappiness at home, and the dangers of the pool hall, Nick’s anger grows; DeLillo writes, “He was angry about something, but it was something else, not the car or the
girlfriend—the thing that ran through his mind even in his sleep” (705). Nick’s violence grows too. First, after an evening of walking around Times Square “looking at people” which made him feel “superior and dumb at the same time,” he viciously rips apart the train seats on the ride home (240-241). Later, in the racial hierarchy of the minoritized space, he expresses his frustration by picking a fight with two “black guys, both of them with team jackets” (763).

While Manx doesn’t express his frustration through anger, DeLillo’s representation of both characters’ unhappiness links Manx simultaneously to Nick and Nick’s father Jimmy Costanza who went out one day to buy cigarettes and never returned. After Manx’s restless night of walking and shilling the baseball, he does not find satisfaction in the money exchanged. He feels he betrayed his son and he feels betrayal at the small amount of money he receives for the baseball. Chris Messenger writes, “Baseball is... always available for textualization as passage, an American rite bequeathed generation by generation, from father to son” (Sport 315). Manx’s robbing his son of the ball exposes him as a failed father similar to Nick’s missing father, and Manx realizes the significance of his failure as a father in this rite of passage. He not only fails to pass the experience of baseball to his son, but he robs Cotter of the experience he took for himself. In order to give away the money from the sale of the ball, Manx tries to find the street preacher he has encountered several times that day; DeLillo writes, “He looks in doorways for the preacher because he wants to give him the money. Get it off his hands. He wants to push the money in the old man’s clothes just to be done with it” (655).

When the preacher can’t be found, his anger does spark, “Booshit, man. Money’s his and he’ll keep it. Take a bus somewhere. Or a room in some shambly street only a mile from home. Find a woman who’ll look at him when her eyes sweep the room” (655). He contemplates disappearing just as Nick’s father has disappeared. Even though DeLillo’s trail to the baseball
is documented up to the man who buys the baseball from Manx, in fact, Nick, Glassic, and the baseball dealer cannot link the ball’s history to Manx. He is just as underground, invisible, and absent as Nick’s father (Duvall 270). DeLillo connects Manx to Nick through the neighborhood in the structural organization, but echoes the father and son dynamic in their parallel situations—the failed rites of passage which in Nick’s case is the anger that runs through his mind even in sleep. Just as Nick’s father has disappeared, Manx wants to disappear, and DeLillo reinforces this effect by not including any scenes with Nick’s father. Nick’s father is constructed through the stories told about him in the novel, yet another point that the Manx sections function to emphasize.  

The sections that follow Nick in the 1990s, Part One and the Epilogue, emphasize orality and oral storytelling, which also connects them to the Manx sections. Many of the other narrative threads in Underworld concern the Thomson homerun baseball and tracking down the baseball’s history. Because the baseball’s story is told in the Prologue and Manx Martin sections, DeLillo positions the reader to know more than the other characters who search for documented proof of the oral stories surrounding the ball. Therefore the reader is able to judge and enjoy how the stories have been exaggerated and changed in the fifty years it takes the ball to go from Cotter’s hands to Nick’s bookshelf. As a material object that travels through the narrative without the ability to tell its own story, the baseball could be any ordinary sandlot baseball without someone to tell its story. Just as the Girgenti family history is persistently reproduced in Ardizzone’s novel, telling the stories about the baseball continually reconstructs the baseball’s history. Without the stories, the baseball has no history, no value. DeLillo sets up a parallel situation in Part One and the Epilogue, with Nick’s storytelling. In Part One DeLillo shows Nick telling stories about the baseball and listening to his mother tell his wife
about his past in the neighborhood. The more stories he hears, the easier it is for him to take
over the narration. By the Epilogue he has revealed his past to his wife and exchanges stories
every night with his son.

First, in Part One, Section Three, it is Nick who is reluctant to tell the story of the
baseball to his co-workers at the Dodgers game in Los Angeles, just as he is reluctant to tell
stories about his own past. In this way, the baseball is a symbol of Nick’s past. He controls the
construction of his and the baseball’s identity through what stories he chooses to tell. Glassic
relates the basic history of how Nick located the ball through an obsessed dealer that Glassic
met. When the client at the game asks Nick about the ball itself, he begs off saying, “‘My
shame is deep enough, Let’s not examine the details.’” When the co-workers press him, he
explains:

“Well, I didn’t buy the object for the glory and drama attached to it. It’s not
about Thomson hitting the homer. It’s about Branca making the pitch. It’s all
about losing. ... It’s about the mystery of bad luck, the mystery of loss. I don’t
know. I keep saying I don’t know and I don’t. But it’s the only thing in my life
that I absolutely had to own” (97).

He sees the ball as representing bad luck and loss, but feels shame about having bought it for so
much money—money that represents his good luck and success. John Duvall writes about
Cotter Martin’s belief in baseball as “the great Americanizer”; Duvall claims that “It is in
[Manx’s] sale of the ball that DeLillo reiterates the ideological function of baseball to mask
race and class difference” (270). Duvall explains that the interaction between Manx and
Charlie, the ad man who buys the ball from him is marked by race and “everything in the
encounter is racialized” (270). While Manx sells the ball in his last section much later in the
novel, DeLillo has already preached this racialized point in the earlier scene at Dodgers’ Stadium in 1990s’ Los Angeles where the Giants are again playing the Dodgers while Nick and his co-workers watch from behind glass in the corporate box. Nick’s financial success highlights baseball’s equalizing national mythology as false. Corporate boxes trump bleacher seats. While Nick and Manx originate from parallel circumstances in the ethnic neighborhood, Nick has had the advantage of race. Sims, Nick’s African American co-worker who listens to Nick explain what the ball means to him, argues that the ball signifies Branca’s ability to prosper despite the bad luck and loss, because of his race. DeLillo bluntly writes: “‘Because he’s white,’ Sims said. ‘Because the whole thing is white. Because you can survive and endure and prosper if they let you. But you have to be white before they let you’” (98). If the ball represents Nick’s past, then DeLillo uses it to also symbolize Nick’s racial privilege. These points are all interrogated through the stories that Glassic and Nick tell about Italian American Branca’s graceful survival and the story Sims tells about the African American baseball player named Donnie Moore who gave up a similar homerun, but killed himself because racially “Moore was not allowed to outlive his failure” (98).

The multiple connections between Manx and Nick show the similar limitations of their neighborhoods, but in the talk about the ball, DeLillo signifies the vastly different consequences. Where Manx cannot transform the good fortune of possessing the homerun ball beyond a few extra dollars, Nick is able to parlay an accidental shooting—the third “shot” of the novel’s “shot heard around the world” — into a Jesuit college education. Nick’s passivity in the shooting, the juvenile detention camp, the Minnesota school, and even in his post-college relationships suggest that the system provides for him, just as the system fails African Americans like the Angels’ Donnie Moore, Manx and his children. For the reader, the baseball
signifies Nick’s success as much as it does Manx’s failure. Later in Part One, Section Seven, Nick wakes from a nightmare and finds himself trying to remember the dream while he clutches the baseball. DeLillo writes, “The ball was a deep sepia veneered with dirt and turf and generational sweat—it was old, bunged up, it was bashed and tobacco-juiced and stained by natural processes and by the lives behind it, weather-spattered and characterized as a seafront house.” He palms the object, and DeLillo writes, “How the hand works memories out of the baseball that have nothing to do with games of the usual sort” (131-132). The ball evokes sound memories: the voice of the radio announcer, “the crowd noise behind the voice,” and his mother getting up in the middle of the night which may be either a memory of the past or an experience of the present. The sound memories then conjure the nightmare that woke him. Memory or dream, Nick thinks, “I hefted the weapon and pointed it and saw an interested smile fall across his face, the slyest kind of shit-eating grin” (132). Hence the baseball “shot” that sunk the Dodgers parallels not only the Russian atomic test, but Nick’s firing the gun that kills George the Waiter.

As reluctant as Nick is to talk about the baseball, he has kept even more silent about the shooting and his past. Throughout Part One, after he moves his mother out of the Bronx into his suburban Phoenix house, his wife and mother discuss the old neighborhood and the past during nightly storytelling sessions. Similar to the storytelling circle in Ardizzone’s In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu, Nick’s mother Rosemary and his wife Marian talk of the past to fill in Nick’s history; DeLillo writes: “They talked of things I did not talk about with Marian, the things I shrugged off when Marian asked, early girlfriends maybe or how I got along with my brother. The small shrewd things Marian used to ask me about. I broke my arm when I was eight, falling out of a tree. This is what they talked about” (85). With Rosemary now living
away from the old neighborhood, she has need to talk about it, and DeLillo presents the after
dinner stories as another ritual in Nick and Marian’s life like the recycling that occurs on
certain days, like Nick’s daily runs, like his work in the “bronze tower.” In these sections of
Part One, mainly Sections Two, Four and Six, DeLillo jumps around in Nick’s thoughts,
presenting fragments of home life, work, and bits of the past in a jumble of stream-of-
consciousness. In the 1990s’ sections, Nick progresses from resisting the stories of the past to
participating in the storytelling. In Section Two, he starts to reluctantly listen to the stories his
mother tells Marian; DeLillo writes:

They also talked about my father. That’s the other thing they talked about in the
depth lull after dinner. It’s the kind of subject Marian seized on, trying to fill in
gaps, work out details. I used to sit in the living room and listen fitfully through
the urgent sexual throb of the dishwasher. I used to half listen, listen with my
face in a magazine, hearing scrumpled [sic] voices coming from the back room,
a cluster of words audible now and then above the dishwasher and the TV set.

(86-87)

As Rosemary fills in the history for Marian, her stories also help her to adapt to the quiet of the
Phoenix back room where she has nothing of her previous life. For Nick, listening to the stories
that the women tell provokes his own memories and stories about his father, the fragments of
which break into DeLillo’s representation of Nick’s stream of thoughts. While DeLillo does not
present the stories as a didactic retelling of history as Ardizzone does, Rosemary’s stories do
evoke an internal struggle within Nick about the status of this oral history particularly about his
father. DeLillo juxtaposes Nick’s gangster impersonation, with his memories of his father’s
leaving. Nick “pick[s] up the phone in the middle of a meeting and pretend[s] to arrange the
maiming of a colleague,” which DeLillo follows with, “He went out to get a pack of cigarettes and never came back. This is a thing you used to hear about disappearing men” (87). By enacting a mob hit to entertain his co-workers he asserts some control over his father’s disappearance, and imagines that his father was forced into leaving by his nefarious dealings with the mob. Yet Nick has doubts as well, and acknowledges that as he will never know for certain if the baseball he owns is the Thomson homer, he will never solve the mystery of his father’s disappearance. DeLillo writes, “It’s the final family mystery. All the mysteries of the family reach their culmination in the final passion of abandonment” (87). Kathleen Fitzpatrick discusses this point as part of DeLillo’s use of historiographic metafiction to “excavate and deconstruct the traces a reified history has left in its present” and claims that the novel “undermines all narrative processes” by “contamination-and-challenging of narrative representation, calling the possibility of accurate telling of any story into question” (151). While Fitzpatrick does not discuss the representations of oral storytelling, DeLillo’s use of these competing stories contribute to the same effect.

In Part One, Section Four, Nick progresses to sitting with Rosemary around the television and listening about the old days in the neighborhood. DeLillo constructs a kind of story circle around the television similar to the traditional one around the fire in Ardizzone’s novel. DeLillo writes in Nick’s point of view, “I sat with my mother in her room and we talked and paused and watched TV. We paused to remember. One of us said something that roused a memory and we sat together thinking back” (101). Instead of telling stories about Italy as the family does in Ardizzone’s novel, the neighborhood becomes the originary place of the past and creates the myth of Nick’s lost father. DeLillo, however, represents the mother’s storytelling indirectly, and filtered through Nick’s impressions. As he listens to his mother’s
memories, he reflects on how confident she is about what she remembers, thus implying his
doubt that such assurance is possible for him. DeLillo states:

> My mother has a method of documentary recall. She brought forth names and
events and let them hang in the air without attaching pleasure or regret. She
spoke a word or phrase that referred to something I hadn’t thought about in
decades. She was confident in her recall, moving through the past with a
sureness she could not manage to apply to the current moment (101).

DeLillo’s repetition of these descriptions of Rosemary’s stories connect to the repeated
recycling that Nick and Marian do and suggest the importance of ritual storytelling to recycle
the past into something meaningful for the present. While Rosemary is uncertain of the present,
she has constructed a consistent certain meaning of the past. As the Girgenti family in
Ardizzone’s novel tell of the abandoned Papa Santuzzu and his life in Sicily, the Shays talk of
life in the Bronx neighborhood and of being abandoned by Jimmy.

By Part One, Section Six, which DeLillo constructs in the same fragmented stream-of-
consciousness style as Sections Two and Four, the pieces of information, gossip and legend that
Nick includes about his father increase, as though listening and talking with his mother has
triggered more memories and thoughts of his father. DeLillo renders Nick’s thoughts switching
to the second person point of view as though Nick is talking to his mother:

> Night after night we sat in the stale glow, my mother and I, and watched reruns
of ‘The Honeymooners.’ Ralph Kramden wailing his unstoppable pain. Maybe
my mother identified with wife Alice. ... But Alice had a bus-driver husband
who kept walking in the door instead of going out. He drove a vehicle licensed
by society. And Ralph and Alice had no kids to worry and torment them. You
had the kids without the husband. Not even a body risen from the rockweed and found floating by two guys early one Sunday in a rented rowboat with a cage for trapping crabs—the nibbled body of Jimmy Costanza, age whatever. (121)

For the reader, the reference to Jackie Gleason’s television show connects the moment back to the baseball game. Nick’s possession of the baseball at the same time allows him to compare his mother’s experience with the couple on the show. Nick’s imagining the dead body of his father in turn suggests the homerun ball, because having Jimmy’s body turn up dead would at least ground the stories of the father in some material physical object. Just as possessing the baseball warrants the memories of the game and the telling of the stories about the ball, having the body of his father would authorize Nick’s memories and stories about Jimmy Costanza.

At the end of the novel, in the Epilogue, Rosemary has died and Nick is able to tell Marian about his past; the two “are closer now, more intimate than [they’ve] ever been” (803). Nick describes how she listens to him; DeLillo writes, “I tell her about the time I spent in corrections and why they put me there and she seems to know it, at some level, already. She looks at me as if I were seventeen. She sees me at seventeen” (807). Nick constructs the shape of his past by finally telling the stories and having someone like Marian to reflect back his stories to him. Because Marian can see him as a seventeen-year-old, he can see himself at that age. In this ending section, DeLillo returns to the previous style of fragmented thoughts in the Part One Sections, and Nick’s thoughts about his father still interrupt. “When I come across his name on a document it always makes me pause, it gives me pause,” DeLillo writes, “the name in jumpy type on some stamped document James Nicholas Costanza, the raised stamped that makes a thing official, the document in the dusty bottom drawer the sense of slight confusion until I realize who he is” (805). As the baseball is a text that provokes memories of the Bronx
neighborhood, the physical paper of the documents evoke thoughts about his father and sustain the ritual restating of the mythology.

In the Epilogue, the story circle gathers not around a fire or the television but around the computers and in cyberspace. If Nick’s father was never present, Nick’s adult son will never leave. Reaping the financial benefits of Nick’s wealth and security, Jeff spends his days on the computer, accessing on-line communities, occasionally working at part-time service jobs. Nick and Jeff do not connect over the baseball, but instead over stories of the Bronx. DeLillo writes:

Jeff is shy about the Bronx, shy and guilty. He thinks it is part of the American gulag, a place so distant from his experience that those who’ve emerged can’t possibly be willing to spend a moment in a room with someone like him. But here we are at the table, sharing a meal, and he tells us about a miracle that took place earlier in the decade and is still a matter of some debate, at least on the web, the net. (808)

Despite having a grandmother who lived her whole life in the Bronx and lived in his house for period, Jeff seems to have absorbed Nick’s guilt over escaping the old neighborhood. The choice of the word “gulug” is telling—the cold war term for Soviet labor camps where undesirable citizens were sent to be punished. Aware of his privilege, Jeff doesn’t think “someone like him” would be accepted by a person from the Bronx. DeLillo seems to suggest that Nick has not shared his past with his son, despite Marian’s new knowledge. While there are no stories exchanged about the Italian American ethnic aspects of Nick’s experience of the Bronx, the Bronx is still connected to the underclass of ethnic poor in these stories that the Shays do share with one another over the meal. Like Nick’s son Jeff, the next generation finds its stories through technology and the internet. Fables of monsters like the Texas Highway
Killer, magical tales of miracles on billboards, or stories about worthiness tests—the traditional fair of folktales and fairytales—are all accessed by Jeff around the warm glow of the computer screen in both Part One and the Epilogue. In this last part, Jeff tells his parents about the rape and subsequent miracle that dominates the last pages of the Epilogue, DeLillo writes:

A young girl was the victim of a terrible crime. Body found in a vacant lot amid dense debris. Identified and buried. The girl memorialized on a graffiti wall nearby. And then the miracle of the images and the subsequent crush of people and the belief and disbelief. Mostly belief, it seems. We ask [Jeff] questions but he is tentative with this kind of material. He is shy. He feels he doesn’t have the credentials to relate a tale of such intensity, all that suffering and faith and openness of emotion, transpiring in the Bronx. I tell him what better place for the study of wonders. (808)

While there are many other things going on in this ending of the miracle on the orange juice billboard and Sister Edgar’s death, in this small moment of storytelling, DeLillo suggests that Nick will begin telling the stories of his own Bronx miracle to Jeff, the next generation. The Bronx, a place for “the study of wonders,” opens an opportunity for more stories of the ethnic space, which include stories of Nick’s past experiences and perhaps the stories of his own father.

G. UNDERWORLD WITHIN THE FRAME: FOLKTALES

Nick Costanza Shay’s journey from the ethnic neighborhood of the Bronx to the nondescript American suburb of Phoenix is fairly typical of later generation Italian Americans, notwithstanding his time in the New York State corrections facility. Just as the Girgenti
family’s journey from Italy to the American urban enclaves shown in Ardizzone’s In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu is typical of Italian American immigrant experience in the first half of the twentieth century, DeLillo represents Italian American ethnic experience in the second half. Italian Americans like Jimmy Costanza and Albert Bronzini married non-Italians and started families while working in those urban enclaves. Some succeeded like Albert, while others failed like Jimmy. Some stayed. Some left. Some, like the Shay brothers, worked through the systems of education, military, or corporate employment to end up in the blank slate of the suburban cul-de-sac. From the Bronx, to upstate New York, to Minnesota, Palo Alto, and eventually to Phoenix, Nick’s journey is as epic, dangerous and damaging as the path taken by any of the Girgenti brothers.

Interspersed between DeLillo’s frame stacks are not traditional Italian folktales as are found in Ardizzone’s novel, but retellings of events that have entered into a kind of American folklore or myth. DeLillo prominently features representations of historic events that have taken on these mythic proportions such as: Zapruder’s film capturing the assassination of John F. Kennedy (488), Lenny Bruce’s stand-up comedy act during the Cuban Missile Crisis (504), Katharine Graham’s legendary Black and White Ball (572), and even the famous Giants-Dodgers baseball game that makes up the Prologue.

By stacking these events in between the portrayals of Italian American and African American experience, DeLillo links the ethnic experiences in the book to events which reflect elements of societal subversiveness or that advocate for social justice. The relationship is another form of folklore’s traditional separation of folk and non-folk, which DeLillo challenges. He forces the readers to consider how characters who represent typical experience, the “folk” experience like Nick’s or Manx’s, are impacted by these larger symbolic moments
which represent the dominant “non-folk” culture. Just as Ardizzone updates Italian folktales to emphasize justice in the new context of American society, DeLillo’s treatment of these historic events are reinterpreted in Underworld as moments that contest the assumptions behind the official story. As Zipes explains about folktale’s function: “[T]hey have provided the critical measure of how far we are from taking history into our own hands and creating more just societies. Folk and fairytales have always spread word through their fantastic images about the feasibility of utopian alternatives, and this is exactly why the dominant social classes have been vexed by them” (Zipes Breaking 3). Thus, DeLillo constructs the scene where the “bootleg” distribution of the Zapruder film at the apartment party tells a new version of the presidential assassination. A filmic storytelling gathering changes the narrative for everyone who experiences it: DeLillo writes, “…they had to contend with the impact that any high-velocity bullet of a certain lethal engineering will make on any human head, and the sheering of tissue and braincase was a terrible revelation. And oh shit, oh god it came from the front, didn’t it?” (489). The underground, oral nature of the Zapruder film cannot be suppressed by the government forever, and the terrifying ending of America’s fairytale President is reinterpreted through the tales told by those who view the super-8 footage. In DeLillo’s construction, and in reality, the point of view of the commoner like Zapruder captured in the home movie subverts the official government narrative.

There are several such historic events similar to the showing of the Zapruder film that function as folklore and act to subvert dominant cultural attitudes and conventions. Even the Giants-Dodgers game of the Prologue challenges the myth of the baseball stadium as a democratizing space. DeLillo’s egalitarian crowd does allow millionaire celebrities to rub elbows with the common folk, but the struggle between Cotter and Bill for the homerun ball
exposes the basic racial prejudices that still exist. The slow walking chase that Bill gives Cotter is informed by the white-black dynamic; DeLillo writes: “But if [Cotter] starts running at this point, what we have is a black kid running in a mainly white crowd and he’s being followed by a pair of irate whites yelling thief or grief or something” (52). By running from Bill in the white crowd, Cotter is suspect. As Bill follows Cotter deeper into the African American neighborhood, their roles reverse, and it is finally Bill who gives up because he feels vulnerable and out of place in Cotter’s neighborhood. DeLillo also reinterprets the famous society party that J. Edgar Hoover attends as another occasion where the status quo is challenged. Nothing says fairytale like a grand ball, and in DeLillo’s representation of Katharine Graham’s Black and White Ball, Hoover is positioned as a Cinderella. Hoover and his assistant Clyde attend as part of the cultured elite: “Political power mingling lubriciously with art and literature. Domed historians clubbing with the beautiful people of society and fashion. There were diplomats dancing with movie stars, and Nobel laureates telling chummy stories to shipping tycoons, and the demimonde of Broadway and the gossip industry hobnobbing with foreign correspondents” (571). In DeLillo’s version of the masked ball, a troupe of performance artists/activists crash the party to protest the Vietnam War and stage a solemn dance that disturbs the privileged guests; DeLillo writes, “They commanded the room, a masque of silent figures, a plague, a spray of pathogens . . .” (576). Like the folk in Ardizzone’s tales who mock the powerful owners and overseers of the latifundia, DeLillo’s protesters subvert the Black and White Ball guests’ feelings of security and privilege. At the baseball game, DeLillo challenges the myth of a democratizing space; while at the ball, he weakens the idea of a privileged one.

DeLillo’s insertion of the Lenny Bruce scenes are a tour de force for the verbal play in his recreation of the Bruce’s ad-libbed monologues. There are five Lenny Bruce stacks that all
transpire during the week of the Cuban Missile Crisis from October 22 to October 29, 1962. Each section presents a performance in a different city—West Hollywood, San Francisco, Chicago, Miami Beach and New York City. As Bruce wanders across the country, his role in *Underworld* is similar to that of the viewing of the Zapruder film or the activists’ performance at the Black and White Ball. He reveals the common folk point of view about the political crisis that brought the United States to the brink of nuclear war. Throughout these sections DeLillo makes social justice one of Bruce’s main foci: He writes in Bruce’s voice, “‘This event is infinitely deeper and more electrifying than anything you might elect to do with your own life. You know what this is? This is twenty-six guys from Harvard deciding your fate’” (505). Later he progresses from pointing out the intellectual and class elitism of the war room, to the racial issue he sees undergirding the crisis. Bruce says, “‘It’s a white bomb, dig,’” and “‘White people control this bomb,’” and then in a “red-neck” drawl, “‘You look down at Watts. You look up at Harlem. And you say, Fuck with our chicks man, we drop the bomb. Better end the world than mix the races’” (547-548). DeLillo’s Lenny Bruce changes the Cuban Missile Crisis from an international conflict with Khrushchev and Castro to a comment on America’s originary and on-going racial prejudice. Bruce is another folk storyteller drawing on the oral tradition to subvert the social conventions of his time from the point of view of the peasants on the ground. Through him, DeLillo challenges the assumptions of dominant society as he does with the folkloric re-interpretations of the other historic events. Ira Nadel agrees and states that “DeLillo presents Bruce as the voice of comic despair but also as the truthteller in the novel, the figure who courageously prosecutes the falsehood, shame, and false optimism of the age” (179). In these sections that deal with historic events like the baseball game, the Black and White Ball, the Zapruder film and the Cuban Missile Crisis, DeLillo returns to the conflict that
folklore enacts over nationalism. As characters experience and tell of these events, they become more aware of their place within nation. Their precarious security and privilege changes as when the ball-chasing Bill walks too far into the wrong neighborhood, or when Hoover’s invite-only Plaza Hotel Party is infiltrated by protesters, or even when a couple of seconds of plastic film changes Klara’s confidence in the stories her government tells.

In DeLillo’s hands, Lenny Bruce is the consummate trickster figure. Jeanne Rosier Smith writes: “In virtually all cultures, tricksters are both folk heroes and wanderers on the edges of the community, at once marginal and central to the culture. Tricksters challenge the status quo and disrupt perceived boundaries” (2). He travels from city to city performing his stand-up act, which takes everything and everybody to task with what Nadel calls “the free-style associative humor that indicts every supposed truth of the culture” (177). DeLillo shows him spontaneously making up stories and talking in voices. He improvises based on his audience’s responses, like any of the traditional storytellers of the ancient tradition. Smith writes, “The trickster’s medium is words. A parodist, joker, liar, con-artist, and storyteller, the trickster fabricates believable illusions with words” (11). DeLillo shows how Bruce is obsessed with language, in particular the sound of language, emphasizing again the orality of the storytelling. He uses “the shrillest sort of falsetto” and “loves the postexistential bent” of “‘We’re all gonna die!’” (506, 507, DeLillo’s italics). DeLillo writes, “Lenny did the voices, the accents. He was not technically sound but mixed in whole cultures and geographies and cross-references to convey the layers of impersonation involved” (545). To call attention to the power of his language, DeLillo’s Lenny Bruce even puts a condom over his tongue and says, “‘Never underestimate the power of language, I carry a rubber with me at all times because I don’t want to inseminate someone by schmoozing with her’” (582). DeLillo writes Bruce as
the trickster who aims his stories at every cultural taboo: sex, religion, politics, and race. However, the one idea that DeLillo repeats several times points to the idea of place and comments on both Nick’s and Manx’s experience of the ethnic neighborhood. He says, “‘The true edge is not where you choose to live but where they situate you against your will’” (505), and later, “‘Everything is real estate. You’re a product of your geography’” (544). The idea behind these statements, that one is constructed by place, includes both one’s socio-economic station in the stratified society as well as the geographical environment to which one is limited.

In the last Lenny Bruce section, he plays Carnegie Hall in New York City. DeLillo uses the end of his performance to connect back directly to the Manx Martin sections of *Underworld*, by having Bruce tell a story about waiting for a cab in Harlem after having been up all night. Bruce does an impersonation of the African American preacher that Manx and Cotter Martin run into several times on that day in October 1951. DeLillo emphasizes the voice again; he writes: “[H]e could not seem to stop doing the voice. It was as if the voice had been crossed with his own. It was as if cross-voices were unavoidable, whether you knew it or not, whether you liked it or not, and maybe this old black man spoke in Lenny’s voice at times. . .” (628). In the voice, he talks about the preacher’s dollar bill again and the despair and hope the preacher simultaneously inspires in Bruce. He describes how the preacher glanced at him, then Bruce says, “‘Seemed to know us in this brief look. Then [the preacher] turned back to the original audience, these three lost people of the streets, these wastelings of the lost world, the lost country that exists right here in America. And he resumed his rap and they stood there listening’” (628). In the merging of voices between Bruce and the preacher, DeLillo equates their roles and calls to mind the connections between Nick and Manx. What the preacher does to tell the truth on the neighborhood streets, Bruce does by proselytizing on the national level.
Both desire their audiences to take a closer look and examine the meanings below the surfaces—of the dollar bill or of a government missile crisis.\(^{29}\)

Inserted in the same Part Five as the Black and White Ball and the sections of Nick’s time in the correctional institution, these scenes with Lenny Bruce do not connect to Nick or the baseball as directly as the other stacks. However, they do function to show how the trickster’s storytelling ability can challenge and resist in order to inspire social change, and to a lesser degree, they suggest some of the trickster elements in Nick Shay’s character. While Nick Shay is not as gifted a trickster as Lenny Bruce, he does display several qualities that link him to Giufà and his type of traditional Italian trickster. DeLillo does not directly reference Giufà or any of the traditional folktales about him as Ardizzone does in *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu*, but enough of Giufà’s characteristics are present in DeLillo’s portrayal of Nick Costanza Shay to suggest a similar function that also echoes Lenny Bruce in the novel. Like Giufà and Lenny Bruce, Nick is a wanderer. He travels from state to state for his job, but also across enchanted landscapes like Klara Sax’s desert field of decorated decommissioned bombers or the nightmarish terrain of a darkened Manhattan during a blackout. He travels by balloon, car, cargo airplane, and on foot and as in the Giufà folktales, Nick always survives the journeys unscathed.

Tricksters like Lenny Bruce and Giufà are “survivors and transformers, creating order from chaos” (Smith 3) and Nick battles through tests of his character like the power outage in New York City, the sexual encounter at the swingers’ convention, the rat in the apartment, the visit to the museum of the misshapens, and even the underground nuclear detonation. These episodes function similarly to the surrealistic and fantastical plots of the Giufà tales and like the Italian bumpkin of lore, Nick “escape[s] virtually any situation [while] possess[ing] boundless
ability to survive” (Smith 7-8). Even when Nick breaks the ultimate taboo, killing a man, he not only perseveres, but his fortunes improve. Zipes writes of Giufà, “he is apt to make foolish mistakes and kill people or animals without thinking that he has committed a mistake” (Beautiful xxi). While Nick is deeply affected by and does pay for the killing of George the Waiter, the situation of the accidental shooting resembles the kind of folk logic reminiscent of the Giufà tales. DeLillo constructs Nick as somewhat passive after George’s death so much so that he longs for “the days of disarray when [he] walked real streets and did things slap-bang and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to [him]self” (810). In folktale terms, “the passivity of the hero is to be seen in relation to the objectively hopeless situation of the folktale audience...[who] had practically no opportunity to resist the increasing exploitation...” (Zipes Breaking 7). These characteristics draw Nick in the tradition of the passive folk hero and symbolically link him to the underclass even after his success in corporate waste management. Smith claims that, “As liminal beings, tricksters dwell at crossroads and thresholds and are endlessly multifaceted and ambiguous” (7). As DeLillo reiterates throughout Underworld, there is nothing so marginalized yet central to culture as waste management, and like the cafone movie producer in Puzo’s Fools Die, no matter how much money Nick amasses or how much he dresses up to go to the office, he still works with waste and garbage.

Nick’s belief in words and his Jesuit training in the language of names has been well noted by critics, but this aspect also connects him to another of Giufà’s traits. The Italian trickster believes in “the literal meaning of words... to communicate with a world that uses words and clothes to veil meanings of actions” (Zipes Beautiful xxi). As Nick learns about words and names from Father Paulus he begins to seize control of his own life. DeLillo writes
in Nick’s point of view: “I wanted to look up words. I wanted to look up veleity and quotidian
and memorize the fuckers for all time, spell them, learn them, pronounce them syllable by
syllable—vocalize, phonate, utter the sounds, say the words for all they’re worth. This is the
only way in the world you can escape the things that made you” (543). He does learn his
lessons well. Smith argues that tricksters — Lenny Bruce may be the ultimate example— both
“redefine American culture” and “reinvent narrative form”; “The trickster’s medium is words.
A parodist, joker, liar, con-artist, and storyteller, the trickster fabricates believable illusions
with words...” (11). Although he does not achieve the linguistic gymnastics of Lenny Bruce to
change American culture on a national level, Nick’s stories and parodic imitation of Italian
mobsters do rewrite the narrative of his father’s disappearance by constructing doubt. He
persistently suggests that his father was in so much trouble with the mob that the mobsters
pushed him into a car and took him away (203). Nick and his brother Matt argue about Nick’s
belief in this story every time they meet up in the novel. Nick’s belief in his version eventually
raises doubts for even Rosemary his mother. DeLillo writes, “She could not bear to think that
Nick might be right. Someone came and got him. This would make her Jimmy innocent. Which
Nick believed from an early age. But maybe the other was worse, the truth was worse. It did
not happen violent” (208). By keeping the mystery alive, Nick controls the narrative for
himself as well as for his family. Just as the baseball’s history is constructed by the stories told
about it, Nick can control his family’s past.

In *Underworld*, DeLillo’s use of the frame stacks with the folkloric ideology conjures a
vision of the past that calls into question how stories and storytelling construct both personal
and public histories. Similar to Ardizzone’s *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu*, DeLillo’s novel
seems to urge readers to examine the stories and how the stories are told for what lies behind.
H. CONCLUSION

DeLillo and Ardizzone combine the frame structure with a folkloric ideology to construct the revised story of Italian American experience in the twentieth century. By reaching back to the stories and tales of Italy and reaching out to connect with the experiences of other minoritized communities, together In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu and Underworld present how a century’s worth of Italian American history is intertwined with both Italian and American history. Contrasting the metaphorical “garden” with the “landfill,” both are storyspaces refracting cultivated and discarded myths, legends, histories, folklore and personal experiences ready to be recycled and reproduced.

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1 W. Edson Richmond claims that, “It has long been a cliché that there are more definitions of folklore than there are folklorists.” In 1984, he identifies “twenty-one different definitions” in The Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend (xi). Scholars have studied folklore that includes oral, material, and popular culture, as well as traditions, institutions, art, stories, architecture and beliefs. Because definitions of folklore are often all encompassing and varied, it may be impossible to find a novel that is not influenced in some way by folklore tales or the oral tradition of storytelling about such lore.

2 In her book The Bracero Experience, Maria Herrera-Sobek uses James Wilkie’s work on elitelore to make a distinction between representations of Mexican-American experience in literature and self-representations of experiences that Mexican-Americans provided her in interviews. She classifies the literature as “elitelore” and the surveys and interviews as “folklore.” She interprets Wilkie’s elitelore as “that body of knowledge which includes self-perception about the organization of ideas on personal and group past and about the building of myths. It also includes the self-deception necessary for the protection of the self image of political or intellectual leaders and of nations in their struggle with the complexities that they only partly understand” (ix). She gives an example of how the United States is invested in the popular literature, movies, books and paintings that “depict hardy pioneers of the nineteenth century conquering the West” (ix). In Ardizzone and DeLillo, the frames call attention to the literary conventions and signal that process of elite myth building.
Within the frame, it is not the actual differences that define the Italians as a group, but the question that they can confidently ask over and over: “Who’s better than me?” (207, 680, 698, 701, 706). As a group the Italian Americans are defined by the compulsion to compare themselves. Rosemary Shay, whose marriage to the Italian American Jimmy Costanza, finds herself drawn into the practice and comments on what she sees. Although she has grown up in an Irish family, she consistently finds herself comparing her children and herself to her Italian American neighbors (755).

The two novellas that make up Gioia Timpanelli’s *Sometimes the Soul* each follow women who are students of stories or folktale scholars. Costanza and Rusina both read, listen, and write about the stories they encounter. As in Ardizzone’s novel, the stories change with repetition but become a shared cultural base. The Santuzzu family members are influenced to keep connected to each other by learning the tales, and similarly the more stories Costanza and Rusina experience, the stronger their bond becomes with the people around them.


See Dorson’s *Handbook of American Folklore*, especially essays by Washburn, Walker, Marcell and Gunn which chart the rise of national myths and specifically how they accelerated in the nativist atmosphere of the first decades of the twentieth century.

See Bethany Bryson’s *Making Multiculturalism: Boundaries and Meaning in U.S. English Departments* for a sociological study of how the multicultural debates played out not only in popular culture but in the academic culture of English Departments at four different types of universities or colleges.

Talese’s article spawned several forums where scholars and writers alike debated the finer points of Talese’s definitions and exclusions. See note 17 below.

His first novel *In the Name of the Father* (1978) describes Tonto Schwartz’s coming of age; the son of a Jewish American father and an Irish American mother, Tonto contends with the problematic Native American name given to him by his father.

Ardizzone’s latest novel published in October 2010, *The Whale Chaser*, returns to another, often hidden, story in Italian American ethnic history—the internment of Italian aliens in prison camps in the aftermath of the Japanese military bombing of Pearl Harbor.

The term “oral literature” is by definition a contradiction, as Walter Ong explains. The word “literature” always implies writing, so calling a text “oral literature” uses the technology of writing to describe a verbal phenomenon. Ong criticizes scholars who read performances such as oral storytelling as variants of written texts (Ong *Orality* 11-14).

See Mathias and Raspa for more on the traditional story circles in Italy.
As Marie-Laure Ryan writes about Gabriel García Márquez’s famous ending in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, “[T]he book is not merely a prophetic but a performative utterance. Its text does not reflect the events—whether past or future—of a more basic level of reality; it makes events happen at the very moment of their own deciphering. The history of the Buendia family is the product of the book, or rather, it is the product of Aureliano’s reading experience, which is as unrepeatable as the experience of his own death” (384). In other words the reading of the novel produces the family’s history, just as Rosa’s telling of the stories produces the Girgenti family history.

Mathias and Raspa’s case study of Clementina Todesco’s storytelling career traces her transition from narrating folktales in Italy and during her first years in the United States to composing and telling stories about her own life. Mathias and Raspa write:

In Clementina’s repertoire of tales, there is a shift from one narrative genre to another, from märchen and legend to personal experience stories, from fiction made believable by tradition and time to fact that changes each day as new experiences color and shape individual memories. The shift continues from a communal experience represented in traditional tales to an individual experience represented by personal memories. In this movement, tale-teller and tales are transformed. (60)

Two websites are dedicated to tracking writing about DeLillo. See “Don DeLillo’s America - A Don DeLillo Site” http://www.perival.com/delillo/ and “The Don DeLillo Society” http://www.k-state.edu/english/nelp/delillo/

See Fred Gardaphe’s *Italian Signs, American Streets*, published before *Underworld*, for a reading of DeLillo’s *Italianità* embedded in the early short stories and in *Americana*.

The digital edition of *Underworld* includes a blurb by Talese who writes: “Astonishing. A sprawling and spectacular look at a half-century in American life as seen through a series of multiple visions that come flashing into our consciousness in ways that are endlessly enlightening and awesome in their insights. DeLillo has raised literary standards to new highs here, and yet the book is a page-turner, a scene-stealer, a triumph of language that takes us everywhere we’ve never been.”

Also, the responses to the question posed by Talese’s *New York Times Book Review* article often cited DeLillo. In particular, the cultural journal *Italian Americana* answered Talese with a forum which includes Thomas DePietro’s essay entitled “Where Are the Italian American Novelists?” After detailing DeLillo’s work for three paragraphs, DePietro ends the short piece with: “Which brings me back, I suppose, to my assimilationist self. I know my argument about DeLillo is a stretch, but if he isn’t a great Italian American novelist, then forget it. Who wants one?” (27)

See Jessica Maucone’s dissertation chapter, “Post-Neighborhood Spatio-Linguistics of the Globalization Age in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* and *Cosmopolis*,” where she reads the importance of Eric’s Italian American barbershop in *Cosmopolis* against Nick’s Italian American neighborhood in *Underworld*. 
See John Paul Russo, pages 212-215, for a review of criticism concerning ethnicity in DeLillo’s work.

See DePietro’s introduction to Conversations with Don DeLillo for more on DeLillo’s famous reticence. He tells one interviewer, “Silence, exile, cunning, and so on. It’s my nature to keep quiet about most things” (viii).

Published in a slightly different form as “Pafko at the Wall” in Harper’s Magazine October 1992. See Griener, 104-109, for a reading of the significance of the changes DeLillo made which were published in the version that appears in the novel.

This last sections are subtitled with the URLs or web addresses that suggest the text may appear on a website as a text within the novel. All of these last sub-sections follow the activist nuns who appear earlier in the novel, including Sister Edgar.

Beyond the scope of this essay, the limited experience of Klara Bronzini Sax in the neighborhood deserves further attention. Like Nick, she is restless, and she confined to the domestic duties of caring for child, husband, and dying mother-in-law while trying to create art in the small apartment. While her friends have traveled beyond the confining neighborhood, in Part Six she is just as limited as Nick or Manx and could even be compared to Rosemary Shay.

Curiously, in the father-son dynamic, DeLillo also avoids showing how Cotter Martin survives the loss of the baseball. Throughout the rest of the novel DeLillo shows Chuckie and Charlie, the son and father who buy the ball that night from Manx, and even Manx’s daughter Rosie who participates in a civil rights protest, yet Cotter never again appears in the novel.

DeLillo makes a point to state several times in both Part One and in the Epilogue that the baseball sits on Nick’s bookshelf and that he often stares at it among the other books. In doing this, DeLillo suggests the physical object contains histories and stories as books do. DeLillo illustrates in fact that Nick often reads markings on the surfaces of the baseball as he would the text of a book (131-132, 809). His wife even puns on the word “homer” connecting the baseball to other bards of the oral tradition including Shakespeare: “Marian caught me once looking at the ball. I was standing at the bookshelves with the ball in my hand and she thought it was like Hamlet gazing on Yorick’s skull or maybe Aristotle, even better she said, contemplating the bust of Homer. That was nice, we thought. Rembrandt’s Homer and Thomson’s homer. We smiled at that” (132). In addition see Fitzpatrick’s discussion of what role books play in Nick’s rehabilitation of self at the correctional facility and at the Jesuit college (158-159).

Donnie Moore gave up a homerun to Boston Red Sox’s Dave Henderson in a 1985 playoff game that kept the California Angels out of the World Series. According to Elliott Almond of the Los Angeles Times, Moore never got over the stigma. He was booed at the stadium and eventually released from his contract. In July 1989, at 35 years of age, he shot his
wife Tonya Martin, who survived, then himself. The suicide was blamed on financial and emotional problems stemming from the one pitch to Henderson and the Angels’ loss.

27 In some ways, Nick’s silence about his past parallels Don DeLillo’s reluctance to talk about his own.

28 See my Chapter 2 for more discussion about how the self is made through having stories reflected back to the storyteller.

29 After performing this story he tells another one about a girl from San Juan who can blow smoke rings out of her vagina (630-633). However, he slowly unravels and deconstructs the story on stage in front of the audience until it is a completely different story about a girl who resembles the Esmeralda of Jeff Shay’s internet miracle which ends the Epilogue.

30 See David Cowart’s chapter “The Physics of Language” for an analysis of Nick’s use of language.
VII. CRITICAL CHRONICLERS: PERSONAL STORYTELLING
in the Criticism of Italian American Literature

The Italian American writers have produced a body of literature that utilizes myriad forms of frames and representations of oral storytelling. From the folklore conventions of Ardizzone and DeLillo, to the *mise en abyme* constructions of Puzo; the embedded dream narratives of DeVries, Bryant and Maso, to the community witness accounts of Waldo and De Rosa, and the journals-with-in-the-texts of Barolini and Maso, Italian American writers have made the telling of their stories integral to the stories they tell. This literary tradition has called the critics to use their own storytelling in the discussion and analysis of Italian American narratives. In the current literary landscape where the use of personal storytelling in literary criticism has both advocates and antagonists, critics of Italian American literature have expanded how personal storytelling has functioned to contribute to discussions of ethnicity in novels, poems, and memoir.

In 2003 Anthony Tamburri published an essay in the *MELUS Journal* entitled “Beyond ‘Pizza’ and ‘Nonna’! Or, What's Bad about Italian/American Criticism?” The title alludes to the two biggest non-Mafia stereotypes of Italian American culture — “food and family” which are, as Tamburri claims, “great themes ubiquitous in Italian/ American cultural production”
(150). In his article, Tamburri subsequently outlines some of the errors that critics of Italian American literature have made:

There are those who ignore, or are ignorant of, what has preceded them; those who misrepresent what they read; those who re-write what others have already written; and those who eschew—what is today in the twenty-first century *a sin qua non*—theoretical issues of literary criticism. Indeed, many might say that much of this is nothing new in the general history of literary criticism. But when that literary critical voice is still young and in need of discoursing externally, as is the situation with Italian/American criticism, it is even more incumbent upon the critic to be aware of his/her surroundings. (150)

While the rest of Tamburri’s essay holds many specific critics of Italian American literature accountable for their omissions and misrepresentations, the “Pizza” and “Nonna” of his title also implicate one more characteristic that many of these texts have in common, namely the personal storytelling embedded in the criticism of Italian American literature, and particularly stories of family.

In other fields of literary criticism, the equivalent might appear absurd. Does a Shakespearean scholar include stories of her grandmother attending the bard’s plays? Would a critic of British Modernism write of his great-grandfather’s experience in the trenches during World War I? Do scholars who research slave narratives describe their ancestral experience of slavery? I can imagine very interesting essays where this personal storytelling might occur, but I think that the examples are few and far between. In the criticism of Italian American literature, however, there are far more critics who embed personal narrative into their texts than those who do not. While assessments like Tamburri’s call for the highest quality of critical
engagement with Italian American literature, the choice of critics to use stories and storytelling deserves a more complex analysis that relates directly to the ethnic and cultural narrative traditions also found in the literature. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the ways in which personal storytelling have been used in literary criticism of Italian American narratives and to what effect.

While the scholarly criticism of Italian American literature is not new, the majority of the nearly fifty existing studies were published after 1990. The first book-length study, *Italian-American Authors and Their Contribution to American Literature*, by Olga Peragallo was published in 1949 while the most recent monograph is Mary Jo Bona’s *By the Breath of Their Mouths: Narratives of Resistance in Italian America* published in January 2010. While neither of these critics uses personal storytelling as part of her analysis, a sampling of the monographs from the last fifteen years reveals the extent of the practice. Fred Gardaphe’s *Italian Signs, American Streets* (1996) opens with a “personal account” of the suspicion his reading aroused in his family’s home (1-4). Mary Frances Pipino’s “*I Have Found My Voice*: The Italian-American Woman Writer” (2000) recounts an extended history of Pipino’s grandmother in a chapter that compares that family history to *Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrant* (13-17). Mary Ann Vigilante Mannino gives the privileged position of her very last paragraph in *Revisionary Identities: Strategies of Empowerment in the Writing of Italian/American Women* (2000) to describing her family’s history (172). In *Writing with an Accent: Contemporary Italian American Authors* (2002), Edvige Giunta prefaces the book with stories about moving the United States from Sicily, and includes small stories of personal interactions with Italians and Italian Americans in several chapters. George Guida interweaves stories about his own experiences as a student in Italy along with stories of his great-grandfather through four of the
five chapters of his *The Peasant and the Pen: Men, Enterprise, and the Recovery of Culture in Italian American Narrative* (2003). Joseph Cosco’s book on the representation of Italians in turn-of-the-twentieth century literature uses a description of his maternal grandfather’s immigrant travels through New York City in the concluding chapter of *Imagining Italians: The Class of Romance and Race in American Perceptions 1880-1910* (2003) (172). Even Thomas Ferraro’s essay on Puzo’s *The Fortunate Pilgrim* in *Feeling Italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America* (2005) explicates his family’s history, including where the scholar was born and raised, and what his maternal grandmother was like in order to claim a greater understanding of the character Lucia Santa (74-75). Family stories abound in the criticism of Italian American literature to record personal histories within the essays on the texts under discussion.³

Critics of Italian American literature⁴ have used storytelling within their criticism to personalize and politicize the study of texts that have for the most part existed in the margins of canonical American literature. Personal narrative has served to establish the credibility of the critic in still emerging fields such as Italian American literature. Inserting personal stories about growing up Italian American suggests an essentialism that needs to be examined. The stories function in part to establish the authority of the critic to read for Italianità and sometimes document the struggles and resistance that the critic may have encountered in trying to research the marginalized literature. In addition, personal stories serve as a call to the community, or a gathering of the tribe, and produce an enlarged audience that opens academic writing to non-academics. As stories lead to other stories, a critic that uses personal narrative within an academic essay invites in other critics who may have similar experiences. Social scientists like Collette Daiute and Cynthia Lightfoot who have used “narrative analysis” as a method and a metaphor for studying development and identity explain that “[n]arrative may be a metaphor
for a life course, a developmental theory, a reference to a totalizing cultural force, and/or the method for interpreting oral or written discourse.” As a tool for research, they describe three of the ways in which narrative has been utilized in social sciences: as “mode[s] of inquiry,” as “specific discourse forms,” and as “genres” (x). In criticism of Italian American literature, scholars have used personal storytelling for each of these functions.

A. DOCUMENTING THE OBSTACLES

Literary criticism has traditionally perpetuated the opposition of two theories about the importance of literature: aesthetic value and social relevance. Lou Freitas Caton claims that in this debate “between the advocates of social representation and the proponents of aesthetic value” the two “deny each other” and “such an overdetermined, paradoxical, and apparently reductive confrontation ... has been discussed by seemingly every generation” (3). Used alternately to include and exclude texts from the canon, these two opposing issues in particular figure prominently in the story of marginalized ethnic literature in the United States. As Daiute and Lightfoot explain, “Narratives are also genres, that is, culturally developed ways of organizing experience and knowledge.” Organizing a way of thinking about the value of literature through aesthetic value and social relevance as narrative genres is similar to the examples Daiute and Lightfoot give of feminist and critical psychological researchers who “have used the concept of narrative as a coherent storyline organized implicitly by some dominant force to characterize the values, practices, and controls inherent in groups determining who the heroes are, what life should be like, and what should be heralded or hidden” (x). If there is a critical genre of aesthetic value, it formulates the heroes as writers and critics who champion beauty of language and form to create and defend a canon of
masterworks against the villains who undervalue “literariness” and “quality.” High profile examples of this genre of criticism include texts such as Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* and E. D. Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy* which promote the “great books” canon for the purpose of preserving cultural standards. In the social relevance genre of literary criticism, the heroes are the scholars and critics who recover and rescue marginalized and long-neglected texts from obscurity. Paul Lauter, the general editor of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, is the representative example of a scholar in this genre and defines several characteristics when he writes in the introduction to *The Heath*:

> [S]cholars in the late 1960s, recognizing the richness and diversity of American culture, began to seek out the large number of lost, forgotten, or suppressed literary texts which had emerged from and illustrated that diversity. That has been a long and slow process for it entailed not only locating, editing, and publishing such work, but also rethinking traditional ideas about what is of value in literature, as well as what intellectual frameworks [to use] for studying it. (“To the Reader” xxxiii-xxxiv)

Recent examples of this political genre include the recovery of texts by women, African Americans, and other ethnic writers.

As the larger narratives at work in literary criticism, the two genre storylines of aesthetic value and social relevance are often simplistically positioned in opposition. As ever-shifting examples of good and bad approaches to literature, the debate continues in journals, at conferences, at curriculum meetings, and in classrooms. Some critics argue that social relevance and having representative texts is most important, while other critics claim that the aesthetic value of the text is the standard by which to judge. Other critics find that discussion
and analysis of the opposition of aesthetic value and social relevance produces a more complete story when writing about or teaching literary texts. Viewing literary criticism as a narrative that includes several competing genres, as for example science fiction includes time travel and fantasy varieties, illustrates how narrative organizes values and practices for critics.

While there are other genres of literary criticism as well, researchers of Italian American literature have positioned the texts for which they advocate between the critical genres of social relevance and aesthetic value. Engaging in the “long and slow process” that Lauter describes of “locating, editing, and publishing” out-of-print texts, Italian American critics took the first steps for emerging criticisms of “excluded” non-canonical literature. Like the other recovery projects growing out of the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the criticism followed the path of other fields of ethnic literature by first establishing that these Italian American texts exist and second by dramatizing how and why the texts were excluded from the established literary community. Proving an absence is a most difficult task, but Helen Barolini’s “Introduction” to *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian America Women* uses personal storytelling to document and examine how the material and socio-political aspects of the Italian American experience exacerbated the aesthetic reception of texts by Italian American writers, specifically women writers. Lauter has discussed the role that anthologies have played in the revision of literary history, citing “magazines, publishing houses and anthologies” as “central to certain significant cultural movements,” and Barolini’s *The Dream Book* is an illustrative example of how writers and editors have “defined their own distinctive voices, creat[ed] their own artistic forms and critical discourses, develop[ed] their own institutions, their own foci for cultural work” (*Canons* 53). As John Guillory has theorized, canonical revision “posits a homology between the process of exclusion by which socially
defined minorities are excluded from the exercise of power or from political representation and
the process of selection, by which certain works are designated canonical, others noncanonical”
(6). The personal storytelling embedded in Barolini’s critical introduction dramatizes this
complex relationship between exclusion and selection while providing anecdotal evidence to
defend her claims in a way that consequently documents and reads the stories into the academic
record.

Barolini’s stories fall into several categories and connect the national noncanonical status
of Italian American literature to the internal and external obstacles faced by Italian American
women writers. In order to characterize the socio-political problems of ethnic literature, she
includes: quotes from oral interviews that anthropologists have done with Italian immigrant
women (9, 11), stories about her children bringing ethnic food to their schools (20) and
examples from a number of letters that other Italian American women writers and readers have
sent to her (22, 45, 46, 49). In addition to the academic studies she draws from, she provides
evidence in the form of studies from oral sources, such as conversations and interviews, which
help to fill the silence about and absence of Italian American women writers. For example, in
defining the reasons that the Italian immigrants favored oral culture over written culture, a
preference that inhibited the education and literacy of Italian Americans, Barolini offers expert
opinion, but instead of citing a journal article or monograph, she describes instead a dialogue
that she had with a psychoanalyst. Research about oral culture is presented as a spoken
exchange:

A conversation with Dr. Marie Badaracco-Apolito, a psychoanalyst, was most
illuminating in the area of language and meaning. We were both speculating,
from experience, on how little value Italians attach to exact meaning and the
literalness of words. *Parole femmine*, they say in Italian: words are feminine, words are for women, frivolous and volatile. Deeds are masculine; men engage in action which is concrete, real. (4)

Women use words; men act. Words and writing are not valued as much as the masculine “concrete, real” actions. The story locates characteristics of Italian ethnicity in oral culture and through her phrasing, “speculating, from experience” and “they say in Italian,” emphasizes the relevance of the unwritten information in narrative. Barolini’s epistemological construction of the concept of gendered language use results from her spoken collaboration with the psychoanalyst and is reinforced by Italian oral culture. Through narrative, Barolini is able to repeatedly document ideas and evidence that are located in lived experience and oral culture. *The Dream Book* then becomes the written source for these concepts previously found in oral culture.

Barolini dramatizes the process she followed to uncover the fifty-six writers ultimately represented in the anthology with stories that simultaneously ask questions and provide answers about why Italian American women have been “excluded” and why there is a perception that they were not “selected,” to borrow Guilliory’s terms. In one example, she writes:

In my search for authors for this work, I asked the curator of a large collection of books and manuscripts by American women if it included any works by women of Italian American background. “No,” she told me, “this collection represents just la crème de la crème. For instance, if Christina Rossetti were American, not English, she’d be represented.” I asked about Frances Winwar. “Oh, yes, of course,” was the answer, “but I never thought of her as Italian.” (6)
The curator clearly does not view Winwar as Italian or Italian American, and this anecdote illustrates at least three contradictory ideas that impact the writers Barolini is championing in *The Dream Book*. First, the curator assumes no “woman of Italian American background” would be included in the collection because her materials represent “la crème de la crème.” Second, the story validates the perceived aesthetic quality of Francis Winwar because she *has been* selected as representative of “la crème de la crème.” And third, the story troubles definitions of what characterizes Italian American ethnicity in writers; that is what does the curator consider when thinking of a writer “as Italian.” Barolini does not explicate the story; it is followed by transitional blank space that acts as a pause and a call to contemplate the contradictions.

In another extended section, Barolini describes the “behind the scenes” support that Mary Gordon’s first novel *Final Payments* received. Like Winwar, Gordon’s name masks her Italian American heritage. Because Gordon is backed by “older established authors who add to their own luster with their literary discoveries,” Barolini outlines how Gordon’s mentors, Philip Booth, Elizabeth Hardwick, Margaret Drabble, and John Leonard, each contributed to *Final Payments*’ publication and success (38). While the “special advocacy” does not detract from Gordon’s accomplishment, Barolini’s story reveals the dominant literary establishment’s production of authors. She consciously outlines an Italian American writer who has access to the cultural capital of other writers, critics, teachers and reviewers to debunk what Lauter has termed “the apparently self-evident character of the canon” (*Canons* 53). Barolini claims “[l]iterary achievement is gauged by appearance in required reading lists, literature course outlines, textbooks, anthologies, critical appraisal, book reviews, and bibliographies.” Because of the years of limited education—caused by poverty, gendered family structures and the
internal psychological pressures on Italian American writers—these elements which lead to literary achievement are “[a]ll things that Italian American writers have been largely excluded from—not by design, but because they lacked prominent names and advocacy” (39). The story of Gordon’s success, like the conversation Barolini cites with the curator, is another oral source, a panel discussion sponsored by the Authors’ Guild.⁹

One last story that Barolini tells in her introduction originates in her work as a librarian and dramatizes how support services like indexing contribute to compounding the invisibility of publications by Italian American writers. Barolini writes:

> When teachers, editors, compilers consult the Wilson [indexing] volumes for, say the names of authors who are writing about Italian Americans so that they can be included in syllabi, presented at conferences, studied and commented on, they are naturally led to the conclusion that there are pitifully few Italian American authors. (46)

Again faced with the task of proving an absence, she turns to narrating her own experience working with the Wilson indexes.¹⁰ She describes the process for texts to attain institutional academic importance—syllabi, conferences, and critical writing— and makes visible the labor involved behind the “self-evident” label of “canonical.” Barolini outlines six series including the bibliography of *American Historical Fiction*, the *Literary History of the United States*, the *Library of Literary Criticism*, *Contemporary Literary Critics*, *The Book Review Index*, and *The Ethnic American Woman* where there are no Italian American novels or writers listed, men or women, “as if,” she writes, “Di Donato, Fante, Tomasi, Winwar, Mangione, DeCapite, etc., had never written” (47). As she does in her previous stories, she connects the “exclusion” to ethnicity, which then propagates the idea that the lack of “selection” is because of ethnicity.
She claims that these absences “demonstrate the self-perpetuating myth on the part of readers, editors, professors (and the demoralizing perception among Italian Americans themselves) that Italian American literature is second-rate because if it weren’t, it would be included in the Wilson publications and other collections...” (48). Barolini documents the strategies for tracking down more Italian American writers. She gives narrative evidence for her analysis of the absence of these writers which she proves is much more complicated than a claim that they didn’t write, or didn’t publish, or even that they didn’t publish aesthetically crafted writing.

To a lesser extent, Fred Gardaphe uses a similar narrative strategy in his introduction to *Italian Signs, American Streets: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative*. He opens his critical monograph with “a brief personal account of the role that reading and writing have played in the development of [his] own ethnic identity.” He states his purpose more directly than Barolini, and aligns himself with other critics of ethnic literature: “The study of ethnic literature is more than reading and responding to the literary products created by minority cultures; it is a process that, for its advocate, necessarily involves a self-politicization that requires placing a personal item onto a public agenda” (1). The public agenda in this case is calling together an audience. Once a text is granted a certain status through venues such as newspaper reviews, conferences, course inclusions or journal articles that place it into a context and academic conversation, an audience is built and can compound through the interplay of each venue as in the example of Gordon’s *Final Payments*. As Lauter explains, “A literary culture requires the existence of an audience, a reading public that, on the one hand, resonates to the beat of the writers’ language and concerns and that on the other hand, serves its needs by reading...” (*Canons* 52). Personal stories about reading dramatize the environmental and institutional obstacles that ethnic literatures have to overcome to build an audience. As
Barolini and Gardaphe show, Italian American ethnicity can draw readers to powerful literary experiences and can be used to validate those experiences.

Just as feminists have argued that the personal is political, Gardaphe uses personal stories to show how his experience of reading books became politicized, first, in his family environment, and then at his school. In his home, the time he spent reading “was seen as a problem and quickly identified [him] as the ‘’merican’ or rebel” (1). He next describes receiving Puzo’s *The Godfather* from an aunt who had not read it but told his mother that “if he was so intent on reading, he might as well read a book about Italians.” Gardaphe claims, “*The Godfather* was the first book with which I could completely identify, and it inspired my choice of the Mafia as a topic for the dreaded senior thesis that my Irish Catholic prep school required” (2). His family environment and reaction to Puzo’s bestseller mirrors a story Barolini tells in *The Dream Book*’s introduction. She writes, “By an early age, I too, had a good start on what is a major motif in Italian American writing—the sense of being out of line with one’s surroundings, not of one’s family and not of the world beyond the family: an outsider” (19). Like Gardaphe, the story Barolini tells illustrates the role that readers play in the status of Italian American literature, and the way that Italian American books create politicized readers out of Italian Americans.

Barolini is also given a book written by Italian American writer, Alma Aquilino’s *Seeds of Doubt*,¹¹ and it changes her thinking about Italian ethnicity. The poems in the book appeal to her “own uneasiness, [her] own sense of doubt,” but the poet’s ethnic identity outshines the content as she explains, “And even more powerful was the fact—unheard of!—that a female with an Italian name had written a book” (19). *Seeds of Doubt* gives Barolini a counter-narrative to organize her thoughts and ambitions. She explains how the book helps her expand
her ideas about Italian experience, “My schooling had provided no texts by authors with Italian names, no expectation that people of my background had a rich literature. We were told, instead, of Italian illiteracy” (19). Both Gardaphe and Barolini point a finger at schools for enforcing not only an absence of Italian American literature but the illegitimacy of the idea of Italian American literature. While Barolini was taught that Italians were illiterate, Gardaphe was given a lesson in linguistic hierarchy and canonical judgment. The senior thesis inspired by The Godfather was graded down not only because Gardaphe “depended too much on Italian sources,” but that in the “serious scholarship” expected at the elite school, the fact that Gardaphe “was of Italian descent” impeded his “essential” objectivity required of “serious scholarship” (2). In their reaction to his thesis, Gardaphe’s teachers sent him chasing his tail—by linking their critique to his ethnicity and perpetuating the myth of the “disinterested critic.”12 If Gardaphe’s newly discovered Italian American literature were ever to receive “serious study,” his ethnicity, according to the logic of the teachers, bars him from being the scholar to do it. The very thing that called him to study—Italian American ethnicity—is the very thing that disqualifies him from doing the work, at least in the lessons of his senior thesis.

Both Barolini’s and Gardaphe’s stories again are able to hold and illustrate the interweaving of aesthetic value and social relevance and the contradictory dynamics of Guillory’s exclusion and selection. Both critics are politicized to different degrees by the experiences reflected in each of their stories. Barolini writes, “Seeds of Doubt explained much and revealed much to me—I was no longer alone” (22). She researched, recovered and collected the Italian American women writers in The Dream Book anthology, and has written novels, including Umbertina, stories and essays of her own. Gardaphe is also provoked to “search for and read books by Italian Americans” and briefly maps out his personal journey
through his studies first as an aspiring young writer, then graduate student and professor. In their use of personal storytelling, Barolini and Gardaphe encourage their readers to read through the lens of their own relationship to literature and ethnicity.

B. CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE

The critic draws attention to her own experience, and makes the personal political by framing academic essays with personal narratives and embedding stories. The obstacles that the critic has overcome to study the texts become part of the argument. By embedding personal narratives within academic criticism, the storytelling writes ethnographic and oral knowledge into the academic record and documents Italian American experience and traditions for use by other scholars while focusing an interpretation through the ethnocritical lens. When researchers use narrative in this fashion, they construct what Daiute and Lightfoot term “specific discourse forms” for “[n]arratives are also specific discourse forms, occurring as embodiments of cultural values and personal subjectivities” (x). Social scientists challenge the epistemological structures by adding narrative to their discursive disciplines. Similarly, personal narratives can challenge the accepted forms of knowledge as Jay Clayton claims, “by drawing on oral forms, ... by exploring less privileged written genres, ... by identifying the contemporary text with archaic symbolic modes ... and by writing about traditional activities” (95). These “unauthorized” forms of knowledge are used by Italian American novelists to challenge established values and canonical characteristics, and when Italian American critics utilize similar strategies, the narratives gain status as discourse and subvert established notions of criticism as well.
Critics of Italian American literature embed personal storytelling in their essays as important components of their arguments. Marianna De Marco Torgovnick’s *Crossing Ocean Parkway: Readings by an Italian American Daughter*, parts of Robert Viscusi’s *Buried Caesars and Other Secrets of Italian American Writing*, and sections of Gardaphe’s *From Wise Guys to Wise Men: The Gangster and Italian American Masculinities* not only challenge established traditions of criticism by inserting personal narratives and vernacular voices into their analysis of the texts but they use these strategies to further highlight the orality and storytelling features in the texts under investigation.

In Gardaphe’s chapter entitled “Fresh Garbage: The Gangster as Today’s Trickster,” he writes about David Chase’s *The Sopranos* and Tony Ardizzone’s *In the Garden or Papa Santuzzu* and opens with an extended personal narrative:

> In my neighborhood when I was growing up, there was a character we used to call the “Ragsaline Man.” He got his nickname because he would call out “Ragsaline, ragsaline,” as he drove an ancient truck slowly through the neighborhood looking for rags, old iron, and other junk. (149-150)

The memory operates as an introductory metaphor (more on that in the last section of this essay) for Gardaphe’s argument that Chase and Ardizzone recycle the gangster figure, but the two-part story does a number of other things. First, Gardaphe has inscribed a significant figure of Italian American collective folk history — the Ragsaline Man — into the written academic record. The rag picker figure appears in several Italian American novels including Tina De Rosa’s *Paper Fish* but historical documentation about his role in the local community is scarce. What documentary evidence there is about what the rag picker did as he roamed the neighborhoods is more likely to be found in the oral histories of community members or buried
in an archive such as the Chicago Historical Society’s photo collection which holds an unlabeled photo of a Chicago rag picker. When the story behind the photo is lost, the ability to understand the photos and the rag picker’s role in the novels is lost as well.

Gardaphe’s description of his memory of the Ragsaline man segues into a description of his grandparents:

Since I had grandparents who were Italian immigrants, I was not surprised that this man could treasure other people’s garbage. We were all taught that it was a sin to waste, and to avoid that sin we had to develop new ways of seeing. In our house we were admonished for anything that might potentially be wasted. If an adult saw a child had not consumed all of the food on his or her plate, the adult would first chide the child, and then, quite often, take what was left on the plate and eat it. Many of our meals consisted of animal parts that butchers threw away or sold very cheaply. When it came to meals, we simply did not leave food on our plates. Anything not eaten in one meal would find its way into subsequent meals. Clothes that no longer fit were passed on to those who could wear them, or they were shipped to Italy. When clothes became unwearable, they were torn neatly into cleaning rags. Nothing was wasted. Our immigrant grandparents, trained to behave this way out of poverty, passed on their frugal habits. (150)

This second part of Gardaphe’s personal story, like the memory of the Ragsaline Man, emphasizes reusing clothes and food and serves to introduce his argument that Chase and Ardizzone recycle the literary representation of the gangster into a trickster figure. But Gardaphe also records the ideology behind the actions of the grandparents linking the frugality and thrift not only to the rag picker, but also to the Italian American community. Elizabeth
Stone writes about the “collective meaning” of family stories and states that “collective understanding is exactly what allows these stories to serve purposes other than entertainment” (10). When Gardaphe connects his family story to the rag picker, he extends the Italian American family to include the rest of the community served by the rag picker. As Torgovnick has written, the “I” “asserts in philosophical terms, the subject status of the speaker or writer” and the “we” “amplifies the same strategy with a leap into the universal that allows the writer to speak for the culture” (“Politics” 142). Gardaphe’s singular “I” transforms into the communal “we” and his story takes on the resonance of the collective cultural history of the community, which becomes an important aspect of his argument.

Robert Viscusi’s *Buried Caesars and Other Secrets of Italian American Writing* uses personal storytelling in several of his chapters to construct a form of “specific discourse” from personal oral history. As in Gardaphe’s essay, Viscusi’s use of the pronoun “we” extends his mother’s words to represent the larger Italian American community. The first paragraph of chapter one, “English as a Dialect of Italian,” establishes the scope of that representation and opens:

“We don’t speak Italian,” my mother used to say, “we speak dialect.”

Everything we spoke, English included, was a dialect of Italian. We had a clear sense that we did not speak any national language at all. As far as we were concerned, national standard Italian was exactly what Dante had meant it to be when he first proposed it: an imperial tongue—that is, a language whose speakers were by definition cosmopolitans. My grandparents were all immigrants, which means they were transnationals, to be sure, but no one would have called them *cosmopolitan*. (25)
What starts as a story of the often repeated, “used to say,” comment made by Viscusi’s mother, transforms almost immediately into “all Italian Americans” in the following sentence, “Everything we spoke, English included, was a dialect of Italian.” Sandra Dolby Stahl has claimed that personal storytelling invites “some one to know him, to know her, intimately” (x), share “certain cultural resources” in the “effort to persuade or influence the audience” (42), and that in “indulging his sense of intimacy,” a storyteller like Viscusi, “believes that the relationship between himself and his audience is sufficiently intimate to allow for the typical proliferation of esoteric allusions” (43). In other words, when Viscusi combines the “we” of his mother’s story with the “we” of his claim, he implicates his audience as part of that “we” and forces his readers to take on the shared characteristics of the “we.”

Like his grandparents, the reader is given the subject position of immigrant who is outside of the national Italian language and outside of the American standard English: “And as for English,” Viscusi writes, “that was another imperial tongue and still something to conquer. ‘Learn English!’ My mother was determined that we should master this language as well as possible” (25). Throughout the chapter, Viscusi periodically returns to the narrative about his mother’s dialect, its history in the mountain “town of Salle, provincia di Chieti, high in the Apenninies of Abruzzi” (26), and how his mother learned its status as a non-standard dialect (32-33). Along the way, he tells a story about the similarly unique traditions that the family practiced when his grandmother cooked polenta with one meatball placed in the center of the dish (29). The personal stories about his mother’s and his family’s use of dialect help him to analyze how the origins of Italian American literature exist between the traditions of Italian and American literary cultures and document that oral experience at the same time. By assuming the reader’s
relationship with the ethnic identity, Viscusi, in a sense, constructs the relationship with Italian American experience for the reader, even if it doesn’t already exist.

In Marianna De Marco Torgovnick’s *Crossing Ocean Parkway*, she includes a chapter entitled “The Godfather as the World’s Most Typical Novel.” Because it was originally published as an article in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, when published as part of her collection of essays she adds an opening paragraph in which she addresses her own use of personal narrative:

> When I wrote about *The Godfather* in 1986, I slipped in references to Italian Americans and felt as though I had put chocolate kisses inside my critical essay—little autobiographical nuggets, pieces of myself. This essay turned out to be a bridge piece for me. I was trying out autobiographical writing; it felt awfully good. I was opening myself to different kinds of writing and exploring subjects about which I never used to allow myself even to think. I was experimenting in print with ethnic identity, talking for the first time in my writing about being an Italian American woman. I hadn’t abandoned ties with my family or denied ethnicity in daily life: I looked Italian, cooked Italian and observed many Italian customs. But now, for the first time, as I connected my work with my personal history, I saw being Italian American as part of my life as a teacher and writer.

As a personal story about the writing of the essay, Torgovnick foregrounds the embedded personal narratives within the essay and links her ethnic identity as an Italian American to her analysis of Puzo’s novel. Her language and tone in this opening—“chocolate kisses” and “autobiographical nuggets”—minimize the importance of these embedded personal stories at
the same time she highlights them by bringing them to the readers’ attention. She also sets up an essentializing definition of Italian American ethnic identity—“I looked Italian, cooked Italian and observed many Italian customs,” she writes, in rhyme no less, implying that readers will know what it means to “look and cook” Italian. The effect of this opening is that it sets up an insider/outsider dynamic. She is claiming insider knowledge that will help her to analyze and explain Puzo’s novel. The breezy phrase that she takes from Lionel Trilling and uses repeatedly throughout the essay is “hum and buzz” (115). She writes, “The Godfather gives us the hum and buzz of Italian American culture, quite apart from its portrayal of the distinct and much smaller subculture of the Mafia” (116). The vernacular here again implies a generalized, unbounded insider knowledge of Italian American ethnicity—yet separates out the Mafia experience.

Torgovnick’s reading of Puzo’s women in this essay utilizes her insider knowledge through relating stories of her family, but also by clearly marking how “outsiders” might read an issue. When discussing Lucy Mancini’s status as a college student in the novel, Torgovnick describes her own insider knowledge—that during the era of the novel, an Italian American girl who attended college would be considered sexually promiscuous. This knowledge is something that Sonny Corleone would consider before taking Lucy on as his young mistress. She writes:

Lucy’s morals are suspect as “thoroughly Americanized.” In Bakhtinian terms, the values and the language of the traditional Italian American infiltrate the novel. To people outside the Italian American community, the distinction between Italian and American would seem spurious, especially since Lucy is, like most younger guests at the wedding, American-born. To outsiders, [and Torgovnick repeats “outsiders”] attending college would seem natural, even
desirable, with a college education implying nothing about a young woman’s “reputation” (117).

This passage utilizes theoretical language—“Bakhtinian”—to render the insider knowledge, and she repeats that she is talking about how outsiders will read Lucy’s sexual reputation incorrectly. Torgovnick claims that, “I was part of that generation” of Italian American children who benefited from the “scholarships and degrees” opened to them “in the decade following Sputnik” and admits that her “own mother could not understand [her] desire to go to college, thinking that [she] should instead become a secretary” (118). By relating the experience of Puzo’s characters to her own, she establishes her expertise that will allow her to document anecdotal and vernacular evidence to support her analysis.

Later Torgovnick returns to this issue of the sexual reputation of women, which she argues is central to the novel and provides purpose to the violent actions of the men. Again she sets her identity as a critic against her ethnic identity as an Italian American woman; she writes: “The emphasis on male power so pervasive in The Godfather has had distinct and in many ways undesirable consequences for Italian American culture, as well as consequences in my own life that make me especially sensitive to it” (121). As Stahl has written of other “literary folklorists,” Torgovnick calls attention to her reading of the gendered Italianità of Puzo’s novel by explaining Stahl’s assertion “that the process of hearing [or reading] the text is a creative act in which the listener’s [or critic’s] own large store of cultural and personal resources is used to produce a unified resonance of meaning” (2). Torgovnick foregrounds her interpretation by establishing the cultural identity and knowledge base from which she draws her analysis: “As a female born in Brooklyn in 1949, my own attitudes towards being Italian American are considerably more ambivalent than those of males I know” (121). Torgovnick, like Viscusi and
Gardaphe, documents cultural attitudes through the use of stories and writes vernacular community knowledge into the academic record. All three critics use that “hum and buzz” as part of the analysis. Torgovnick is especially direct about her use of personal storytelling to document gendered issues which very well may not be documented elsewhere:

It is difficult to prove, except by anecdotal evidence, how strongly Italian American culture in the period and place covered by Puzo’s novel resisted the idea of college and careers for women, even while beginning to entertain those ideas for men. But Puzo’s novel provides traces of such evidence, and even anecdotes can be compelling. So let me give one, by quoting a young man, an Italian American soon to be college-bound, who informed me, in the sixties (echoing the movie Marty in all seriousness), that “college girls are one step above the gutter.” (121)

Torgovnik documents the Italian American attitudes toward Italian American college women in her essay to analyze Puzo’s novel, offering the popular film Marty as additional support, and now the previously unwritten cultural attitude is part of the academic record and available for others to study or quote at an academic conference, in classrooms, or in journal articles and books.

The personal storytelling done by Torgovnick, Viscusi and Gardaphe constructs a relationship with readers that encourages identification with Italian American experience, but can also exclude readers not familiar with Italian American ethnicity. Whether or not this constructed opposition between cultural insiders and outsiders will bring readers, teachers and scholars to Italian American literature is a pressing question that the last section of this chapter will address. However there is no doubt that the stories told by Torgovnick, Viscusi, and
Gardaphe not only provide an important window to the vernacular ethnic elements in the novels, but inscribe collective oral history into what Daiute and Lightfoot call “specific discourse forms” for other scholars and readers to access.

C. NARRATIVE METAPHORS

Daiute and Lightfoot define a third category of narrative analysis as a mode of inquiry based on “root metaphor.” They write: “As a metaphor, narrative analysis involves explaining psychological phenomena as meanings that are ordered from some theoretical perspective, like that of a storyteller, and consist of information and comments about the significance of that information” (x). In a world where meaning is constructed through the interaction and juxtaposition of stories which are also shaped by language, setting personal stories next to argumentative interpretations, links the two meanings and allows a reader to read the argument through the lens of the story.

Therefore, in “Fresh Garbage,” Gardaphe’s personal stories about the “Ragsaline” man and the frugality of his grandparents become metaphors. As stories used to interpret other stories, the “Ragsaline” man and the thrifty grandparents embody characteristics and values of Italian American culture which are then applied to the manner in which Gardaphe analyzes the re-envisioned gangster as trickster. He writes, “This tradition of seeing garbage in a fresh light, of not wasting anything, of making something out of nothing and seeing one’s ancestors in the result, provides a good frame for understanding the new version of the American gangster presented in David Chase’s HBO television series The Sopranos and in Tony Ardizzone’s novel In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu” (150). Recent theories of metaphor such as James Seitz’s discussion of the literalist position on metaphor have contended that more important
than what a metaphor might mean, is the effect it has on the reader; he writes, “What matters most, in other words, is not the interaction between the elements of a metaphor,” — and the example he uses is “Men are wolves” — “but the interaction between a metaphor and those toward whom it is directed” (97). Obviously, men are not literal, actual wolves, but the writer’s use of the language sets the reader on a complex search for meaning, which begins with rejecting the “equivalency” of the metaphor as false. According to Seitz this rejection signals the presence of figurative language and then stimulates the readers to “make the vision produced by the metaphor their own; they must see as it asks them to see, whereby its two elements become not just comparable but identical” (99, 108).

If Seitz is correct, then the use of personal storytelling as narrative metaphor acts as other frames have done when used by novelists. The narrative metaphor tries to focus the reader’s view of the material connected by the metaphor. For example, examine the transition Gardaphe uses to construct the narrative metaphor that connects his extended story to his argument: “As a crafty ragpicker, [David Chase] cast an eye over the garbage heap of film characters, picked up the discarded gangster, dusted him off, and gave him a new life by settling him back down in the suburbs, where today over 60 percent of U.S. Americans live” (150-151). In the logic of this narrative metaphor, David Chase is the crafty ragpicker, and therefore part of Italian American collective history that is also connected to the Italian American communal experience embodied by the Ragsaline Man and the frugal grandparents. The “equivalency” of the narrative metaphor asks readers to accept Chase not only as rag picker but as part of the tradition of other Italian American writers. Extended further, Gardaphe’s storytelling appeals, especially, to resistant Italian American readers who may object to the show and Chase’s use of the mafia storylines.
The use of narrative metaphors sometimes appears simplistic because of the accessibility of personal storytelling. The critical writer runs the risk that the reader will not be convinced by the metaphor and that the initial rejection of the “equivalency” implied in the metaphor will not stimulate the reader’s engagement with the figurative language or the search for the wider meaning. The academic literary community has discouraged the use of personal stories presented as part of argumentative essays. However, narrative theorists such as David Schaafsma have claimed that personal storytelling has a persuasiveness especially when implemented in cases “invested with intentionality—passionate, experiential knowing” (30). Emerging fields such as Italian American literary criticism collectively commit to building a community of individuals. Until recently, the critics who have worked on Italian American literature have relied on their own experience with Italian American culture because its oral tradition and “experiential” ways of knowing have left gaps in the written record. Because there are now a significant number of critical studies of Italian American literature, researchers may depend less on personal storytelling to document Italianità, but they have not abandoned the use of personal storytelling as a rhetorical strategy. Schaafsma writes, “The nature of story is to heighten the indeterminancy, the possibility of change in reality by demonstrating through the interplay of voices the shifting nature of experience” (31). Critics well versed in characteristics of Italian American storytelling utilize this persuasive strategy to challenge established definitions of, or approaches to, literature.

Several critics use personal storytelling as a metaphor in the narrative analysis of texts, as Gardaphe does, when the audience may be resistant to the text’s relationship with Italian American ethnicity. The strong and very vocal anti-Sopranos faction of the Italian American audience opposed the show and Chase’s portrayal of the criminal mafia elements linked to the
Italian American family elements. Gardaphe’s use of narrative metaphor purposefully targets this part of the audience in his choice of which metaphor to use. In “‘We were working on an erotic song cycle’: Reading Carole Maso’s AVA as the Poetics of Female Italian-American Cultural and Sexual Identity,” another critic, Roseanne Giannini Quinn uses personal storytelling as a narrative metaphor to establish the relationship between Italian American ethnicity and Carole Maso’s AVA, a novel with no obvious markers of Italian American experience or culture. Quinn uses opening and closing sections of personal storytelling to fully frame her argumentative essay in narrative metaphor. Maso’s AVA is an experimental novel which portrays the fragmented and jagged deathbed thoughts of the narrator Ava Klein. The style of the novel is what Quinn calls “formal disruptions” as she explains, “From the top to bottom of every page, there is a line or two, sometimes three or four, and then a blank space before the next line or two appears” (94). Because of this distinctive style, other critics have focused their essays on the form of the novel. Ava Klein is a professor of Comparative Literature and the child of Holocaust survivors, and both issues have directed the arguments of other critical essays. Still other essays have been published on Maso’s post-modernism and her gendered poetics. By writing about the “Italian American Cultural and Sexual Identity” underlying AVA, Quinn’s approach to the novel offers an alternate reading that challenges or enlarges the body of writing that has accumulated around this novel.¹⁹

Quinn opens her essay with a four paragraph personal story about her own search for Italian American identity that begins, “Throughout my childhood, I was brought up to be Italian and I was brought up to be American: two distinct identities not to be merged but to exist somehow simultaneously not quite one and not exactly the other, in a kind of hybrid state” (91). She recounts listening to Italian lullabies, taking Italian language classes, and then traveling to
Italy as “la turista.” The story ends with the “young Italians” rejecting Quinn as another American; she writes:

They resented my presence and did not see any connection at all to who I was, and what I looked like, to who they were and where they lived and what they wanted. When I returned to the United States, I didn’t feel so Italian anymore. I’ve been wondering ever since how to assert a non-anglo American identity, a specifically Italian one, at the same time that I know Italy is not my home. (92)

Quinn’s narrative of rejection and dislocation is a familiar tale to many third and fourth generation children of immigrants and firmly establishes that her essay is going to engage identity politics. Quinn asks outright, “What constitutes Italian-American culture for a third-generation daughter born of a second-generation parent?” In her use of the personal story as narrative metaphor, Quinn sets up an “equivalency” between her own search for cultural identity and the questions raised by Maso’s book.

While Quinn does not use a direct transition as Gardaphe does when he connects the rag picker to David Chase, her question about her own identity quoted above links directly to the question she asks of the novel: “What place does Carole Maso’s AVA have as literature which can be read [as carrying the trappings of Italianità], as something distinctively third generation Italian-American?” (93). She equates her third-generation search for identity with the book’s third-generation search for identity. As Seitz explains, the narrative metaphor evokes a rejection of the “equivalency” first, and Quinn enacts this initial stage for the reader: “After all, Ava as a character is not Italian-American nor is she Italian. She is Jewish and is set forth to wander in the text from New York to Europe and back again.” By articulating the reader’s objection to the metaphor, Quinn acknowledges the logical steps she is asking the reader to
take. Next she coaxes the reader to move beyond his or her reaction and suggests a first way that the reader may engage in seeing the metaphor as meaningful: “Unlike Ava,” she writes, “the author of her story, Carole Maso, is of Italian-American descent and has written about the consequences of Italian-American assimilation directly in her first book *Ghost Dance*” (93). From this point, Quinn builds on Maso’s Italian American lineage and her previous books to draw the reader further into the argument about AVA. “Read within this context,” Quinn claims, “I understand Carole Maso’s work as a reclamation of a lost Italian cultural legacy where an essential component of *italianità* is that it encompasses and is intertwined with the recovering of a woman-centered culture which has suffered complex modes of destruction and erasure” (94). The personal story about recovering a lost identity that opens the essay is fully embodied in the claim her essay is making about AVA and Maso’s work in general.

Quinn ends her essay with another personal narrative. More than a concluding echo of the introduction, framing the end with another scene of dislocation and rejection turns the essay back onto itself and forces the reader to reconsider the opening story. Quinn writes:

> When I think about all that Ava does manage to say and those empty spaces in between, where Carole Maso urges the reader to find “a place to breathe,” I think of my own state of cultural dislocation and feel comforted. I still do not know how I will better negotiate being Italian and American but there are possibilities there, strength in the amalgam, opportunities for reconciliation: songs to be sung, music played, stories told, women loved. (109)

Reinterpreting Quinn’s search for identity through the Italian lullabies, language, and trips to Italy as “comfort[ing]” or filled with “possibilities” rewrites the “cultural dislocation” as a place for potential which is a direct result of Quinn’s analysis of AVA. At this point, the
“equivalency” of the narrative metaphor is transformed by the discussion of AVA and has become stronger. In the final scene of the essay, the critic, the character and the book merge together in common experience. The scene is dramatized:

I went to look for you, Ava Klein, at the unwelcoming, understocked bookstore in the small Midwestern town in which I temporarily resided. You were not on the shelves, your book I mean, so I went to the back of the bookstore, where the store’s owner and the store’s manager were busy on their bookstore computers.

“I’m looking for Ava,” I said, “She’s not on the shelf... I mean I’m looking for Carole Maso’s book, AVA.”

“She’s in the basement,” said the two men at the same time. (109)

In this short scene, the book, character and critic are misplaced: Quinn is “temporarily” set in an inadequate Midwestern town, and searches for the Ava Klein character closed up in the physical object of the book which has been deposited in the discarded margins of the store’s basement. After some time passes, the store’s manager returns from the lower spaces with AVA, “wrapped in clear plastic” and without a price tag. The man turns hostile: “‘Here she is,’ he said, ‘twenty percent off,’ tossing the book toward me in disgust” (110). While more literal and more melodramatic, the clerk’s reaction mirrors the rejection from the “young Italians” that Quinn relates in her opening story. After her purchase, the image of the dancing woman on the book cover calls to her: “Somewhere Ava says, ‘Shifting voices and constant breaks of mode let silence have its share and allow for a fuller meditative field than is possible in linear narrative or analysis’ (184), or is it you who is talking, Carole Maso, giving me a place to begin” (110). Analyzing a novel full of “shifting voices and constant breaks of mode” Quinn
utilizes the storytelling and hybridized forms of Italian American experience to both discuss a non-traditional novel and orient it in the traditions of Italian American thought.

D. CONCLUSION: GATHERING AUDIENCE

Narrative theorists see examples such as the Quinn, Gardaphe, Torgovnick, Viscusi, and Barolini texts as important and write about narrative as an ideology that clashes with hierarchical structures in the academy which control/restrict activities like publishing and tenure.

But if frames and embedded stories both legitimatize and subvert as they do in fictional texts, the stakes may be even higher in critical texts which use storytelling. There are still a number of questions to be answered that the use of personal storytelling has raised for the criticism of Italian American literature. Does the use of framing and embedding personal narratives in literary criticism put too much emphasis on the critic’s personal experience so that in a field like Italian American studies a critic will have to prove a certain level of Italian Americanness to be accepted as a scholar? As form follows content, what elements in Italian American texts encourage critics to use stories when interpreting and analyzing texts? What effect will the collective use of personal storytelling in studies of Italian American texts have on attracting more scholars to the field, or persuading teachers to teach Italian American texts in more generalized or comparative courses? For every Gardaphe or Torgovnick or Barolini text, there are examples of personalized storytelling that are not effectively integrated into the analysis and that can be read as the superfluous “Pizza and Nonna” stories targeted by Tamburri’s critique. And ultimately will there come a point when the techniques and
strategies that called the community together to produce the field now keep the community closed to new scholars?

There are several possible reasons for the flourishing of critical work in Italian American Studies around this time. The 1986 publication of The Dream Book anthology identified a community of writers for the first time and brought together writers with critics at a series of readings. Several years later, the national spotlight focused on the August 1989 death of Yusef Hawkins at the hands of young men some of whom were Italian American in Bensonhurst. The controversial success of Spike Lee’s film Do the Right Thing (1989) showcased the tensions between Italian American and African American characters and provoked public dialogue and discussion in the academic community for a wider audience. From the Margin: Writings in Italian Americana (1991) and the simultaneous founding of the academic journal Voices in Italian Americana created another on-going forum for literary criticism at this historical moment.


In other fields of Italian American study personal storytelling appears in newer history texts such as Nancy Carnevale’s A New Language, a New World: Italian Immigrants in the United States, 1890-1945 (2009), and older sociological texts such as Richard Gambino’s Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian Americans (1974). In film study, Peter Bondanella’s Hollywood Italians: Dagos, Palookas, Romeos, Wise Guys, and Sopranos (2004) opens with an extensive story about his family so as to prove that he is not motivated by a “search for personal identity” (10).

A good number of the critics of Italian American literature have also published works of fiction, memoir, and poetry.

The first edition of The Heath Anthology of American Literature (1990) broadened the scope of literature available in anthologies at the time by including “the widest sampling” of work by minority and women writers. Lauter’s introduction claims that the process of selection “represented a re-surveying” of “a new literary world” and “that nothing worthwhile has been omitted; but much that was lost and is excellent has been found” (“To the Reader” xxxviii). The advertising materials for the sixth edition boasts: “Unrivaled diversity and teachability
have made *The Heath Anthology* a best-selling text. In presenting a more inclusive canon of American literature, *The Heath Anthology* changed the way American literature is taught."

6. See Katharine Newman’s “MELUS Invented: The Rest Is History,” for the political nature of the MELUS’s mission to recover and publish the “lost” texts (100-101)

7. As though there are universal standards for what is or is not of aesthetic value. See Gregory S. Jay’s *American Literature and the Culture Wars* (1997) for an extensive discussion of how the debate between aesthetic values and social relevance transpired in the 1990s.

8. See Gerald Graff’s *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can ReVitalize American Education* (1992); see also Jay.

9. While Barolini does not confirm whether she attended the panel, she cites the *Authors’ Guild Bulletin*, a newsletter that functions similarly to a community based communication.

10. In 1986, the first Wilson Index became available in an electronic format; previous to that time, a researcher would have had to rely on the subject keywords chosen and published by the indexing company. With advances in digital keyword searching, a researcher can now combine key terms and phrases to find sources outside of the subjects previously established in the print editions of the indexes. As Barolini describes, the print editions of the indexes used established subject headings and terms so if the category “Italian American” were not in use, books and authors that might fit that descriptor would be listed under another existing classification.

11. Published in 1940, by Falmouth Publishing House.

12. In his collection of book reviews titled *Dagoes Read: Tradition and the Italian/American Writer*, Gardaphe essentially dismisses Matthew Arnold’s “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” by writing, “Italian/American literature began the moment an Italian immigrant wrote in reaction to life in America. ... Italian/American literature then is the result of what happened when those dagoes began to read. And finally the necessary criticism and histories will appear only when dagoes read other dagoes” (10).

13. See Gian Pagnucci’s *Living the Narrative Life: Stories as a Tool for Meaning Making*. He outlines the obstacles and consequences that graduate students and professors face when they use narrative storytelling in dissertations and peer-reviewed articles. He describes the hierarchical valuing of argumentative writing over narrative writing as an ideological belief that has been naturalized as fact. He writes, “Given the pervasiveness of anti-narrative views, then, choosing to adopt a narrative ideology engages one in a struggle with the status quo, puts one at odds with one’s department, one’s university, even society” (46).

14. According to Torgovnick, the power of the “we” subject position “affirms the privileges of membership” and can omit “vivid senses of exclusion” (“Politics” 140).
Ironically, one of the sections of Ardizzone’s novel that Gardaphe discusses is the tale of Luigi Girgenti called “The Wolf of Girgenti” in which Luigi, who is underfed in his father’s house, leaves to live in the hills and mountains with a group of bandits. When he joins in with the gang, in Ardizzone’s folktale, he is transformed into a wolf. Gardaphe reads the wolf as a metaphor for a gangster, “Wolves are often used to symbolize characteristics associated with the gangster: loyalty, success, perseverance, intuition, independence, thought, intelligence, and the shadow” (From Wiseguys 165)

And of course, like DeLillo’s Nick Shay, Tony Soprano is employed in waste management superficially at least as the cover for his other mafia transactions.

See Pagnucci’s chapter, “The Perils of the Narrative Life” for a description of what he calls “anti-narrative” policies practiced by academic journals and tenure committees (13-22). Vitriolic dismissals like David Gorman’s review of H. Aram Veeser’s anthology Confessions of the Critics: North American Critics' Autobiographical Moves illustrate the simplistic rejection of the use of narrative. Gorman writes, “If there were anything more to Confessional Critical writing than self-exposure masquerading as ‘transgression’ of disciplinary codes, the result might be interesting; but, to judge by most of the work collected by Veeser, all there is to Personal Criticism is this routinized stylistic device. Though there remains no convincing justification for Personal Criticism, there is certainly plenty of motivation for it, as some of the more reflective contributions to this volume attest. There are self-serving, self-deceiving, and (let me say it) self-indulgent motives in evidence in a number of the essays...” (par. 14-15). Regardless of how the individual essays use or misuse personal storytelling, Gorman dismisses the included stories as a style device with no value.

See Regina Barreca’s “Introduction” to A Sitdown with the Sopranos: Watching Italian American Culture on T.V.’s Most Talked-About Series. Barreca explicates the many subtleties and complications of how Italian Americans respond to the show and how their response is both typical of the wider audience and distinct to the ethnic group.

On its website, Maso’s publisher, the Dalkey Archive Press, also offers AVA by Carole Maso: A Casebook, Edited by Monica Berlin, as files that are free to download. None of the five essays address Italian American ethnicity but do cover: Approaches to the novel, Textual Bodies and Poetics, Genre, Music of Time, and Strategies for teaching the novel. Although Quinn’s article is listed in the Selected Bibliography, it was added only after Quinn talked to the press several times and convinced the staff to include information about the MELUS article.

Maso worked as a Visiting Professor at Illinois State University in the small, midwestern town of Normal, Illinois, while Quinn received her Ph.D. at another midwestern location, the University of Iowa in Iowa City.
VIII. CONCLUSION

To frame in is also to frame out, so that the notions of grid and selection, of inclusion and exclusion, are constantly in play, as well as those of border and of centering of focus. (3)

—Mary Ann Caws, Reading Frames in Modern Fiction

They say we tell stories to amuse, instruct, enlighten, inspire. With its stories a culture reinforces its sense of itself and shows wonder and respect for the larger and spiritual universe as well. These old tales come from careful living in a specific place. The ancient storytellers, retelling vividly the stories in their keeping, were important guardians of the history of the place where they lived as well as keepers of their people’s literature. This was the chain that went back from teller to teller, generation after generation. (132)

—Gioia Timpanelli, “Stories and Storytelling, Italian and Italian American: A Storyteller’s View”

Italian American writers use narrative frames and texts-within-the-text to tell the stories around and the stories within novels depicting Italian American ethnicity. As form follow function, specific framing strategies shape the stories of migrant storytellers, historical witnesses, incompetent dreamers, collective authors, and folkloric mythmakers in Italian American novels. Full frames, partial frames and embedded stories in the novels both recount and question the acculturation of Italian immigrants in America. The reflexivity of the narrative frames that foreground both the storytellers and their stories creates tension between the texts-within-the-texts and the representations of oral-storytelling characteristics that often have their roots in Italy.
Throughout this project I have argued that writers used the structures of their storytelling to shape ethnic identity within an American national imagined community. In the previous chapter, I discussed how literary critics of Italian American narratives also use personal storytelling to shape their discussions. The purpose of framing in the quotidian sense is to make visible or to put on display, and the critics before me have framed Italian American literature within the broader category of American literature to recover the texts from obscurity and to foreground the shape of that tradition. An embedded Italian American narrative is set within the broader story of literature.

Because of this work that tells the story of the ethnic past, it is now possible to discuss how Italian American novels also engage in dialogue with other established literary traditions that have defined the canons. While I agree with critics like Werner Sollors and William Boelhower that “ethnic writing is American writing” (Boelhower 3), there is still more work to be done to show how ethnic writers engage and transform the literary aesthetic conventions that have constructed that “American writing.” Laurie Grobman has suggested that “What we value in multiethnic literature, is the mutually enriching connection between the political and the creative in a process of cultural specificity and cross-cultural negotiation” (83). From the beginning, I have drawn the purpose of my project from Grobman’s claim and from Josephine Gattuso Hendin’s call for a “socially relevant aesthetic.” She calls for critics:

to formulate a conception of the relationship between the historical and formal properties of recent Italian American writing that can serve as a basis for an understanding of an innovative and even revolutionary aesthetic that it may share with other ethnic writing. (“Social Constructions” 13)
By focusing on texts which employ narrative frames, I am connecting these Italian American novels to both canonical and other ethnic novels which also politicize the storytellers through aesthetic forms of narrative framing to foreground the cultural difference and social importance of the story that is being told. I have tried to illustrate how Italian American writers interpret selfhood and migration, witnessing and regional community, memory and trauma, authorship, and folklore and history within the ethnic frame.

The task remains: how do we continue to keep Italian American texts present as a tradition and show how that tradition interacts with the broader literary traditions not only of the United States but of other transnational diasporic literatures as well? I believe keeping discussion active in both contexts is vital, and that there are many more contexts in which to place Italian American texts into the dialogue.

Finding new contexts and discovering how Italian American texts will contribute to the discussion are two additional future tasks which can also benefit from an approach based on the systems of framing and storytelling. Mary Ann Caws provides one suggestion which is to keep the frame “constantly in play” with its “notions of grid and selection, of inclusion and exclusion... of border and of centering of focus.” Both scholars and storytellers should continue using different viewpoints to experience the gaze and to control the lens. If the frame connotes looking and being seen, then storytelling emphasizes speaking and listening. Gioia Timpanelli supplies another suggestion in her urging to retell the stories in order to extend “the chain that went back from teller to teller, generation after generation.” In order to recount a story one first has to hear it, and we all have the responsibility to both listen to others’ tales and tell our own. The focusing power of the frame and the energetic repetition of stories can continue to define the future work of Italian American literature.
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